

細音
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illustration

猫鍋蒼

the War ends the world /
raises the world

キミと僕の最後の 戦場、あるいは 世界が始まる 聖戦

the Fencer who wears
stellar swords and
the sorceress Princess of
ice disaster



ファンタジア文庫

Kimi to Boku no Saigo no Senjo, Aruiha Sekai ga Hajimaru Seisen

**The Last Battlefield Between You and I,
or Perhaps the Beginning of the World's Holy War**

- Volume 1 -

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[Hikoki Translations]

- STORY -

The Empire endowed with an advanced level of knowledge, and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency feared as the 'Country of Witches.' On the long lasting battlefield between these two countries, a boy and girl met.

The swordsman who became the ultimate force on the battlefield at the youngest age throughout all the Empire's history—Iska.

The ice witch princess praised as the strongest in all of the Imperial Household Agency—Aliceliese.

"If you capture me, your dream may also be fulfilled."

"Likewise, if you defeat me, it will become a step in the unification of your world."

The two arch enemies were to kill each other. However, the boy had his heart stolen by the girl's beauty and nobility. And the girl was attracted to the boy's strength and way of living. Even if walking alongside one another would not be permitted and the only path before them was to defeat each other.

the War ends the world /
raises the world

キミと僕の最後の戦場、あるいは世界が始まる聖戦

帝国

機械仕掛けの理想郷

Empire

高度な科学力と強大な軍事力を持つ、
世界一の大国。星霊を使う皇庁を脅威
ととらえ、滅ぼそうとしている

皇庁

魔女たちの楽園

Imperial Household Agency

『星霊』という未解析エネルギーを操っ
て超常の力を引き起こす、魔女たちの国。
自分たちを迫害してきた帝国を憎む

燐・ヴィスポーズ

Rin Vispose

アリスリーゼの側近兼メイド。土の星霊を使い、暗殺術にも長けている

昼間のことは、アリス様の胸の内だけに留めてください

アリスリーゼ・ルウ・ネビュリス9世

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX

ネビュリス皇庁の第2王女。氷の星霊を使う強力な星霊使いで、帝国からは『氷禍の魔女』と畏怖されている

帝国を倒して世界を統一する野望は誰にも邪魔させない

なんなら目をつむって撃つても問題なかった

ジン・シュラルガン

Jhin Syulargun

小隊の狙撃手。イスカとは同じ師匠のもとで修業した過去を持つ腐れ縁

ここで諦めたら、誰がこの戦争を止めるんだ

音々・アルカストーン

Nene Alkastone

小隊のメカニック担当。イスカのことを兄のように慕う、快活な少女

イスカ兄は一度決めたら頑固だもんねー

ほらお姉さんに全部話してみなさい！

ミスミス・クラス

Mismis Klass

イスカの所属する小隊の隊長。小柄で童顔だが、れっきとした22歳の大人の女性

イスカ

Iska

帝国に所属する軍人の少年。史上最年少で帝国軍の最高戦力『使徒聖』に上り詰めた。星剣という特殊な剣をふるう

白い湯気。

獅子の顔を模した給湯口からは乳白色の湯が浴槽からあふれだすほどに注がれて、その湯面に浮かぶのは色とりどりの花と香草。

「……………」

湯船のなか、アリスは己の胸に手を押しあてた。


早熟——と隣から羨ましがられるほどに女性らしく成長した胸から伝わってくるのは、自分でも不思議なくらいの速度で早鐘を打つ鼓動。

とくん、とくん、とくり返す。

それは収まるどころか今も強まる一方で。

「あーもう！ よくないわ！ これは気分転換が必要よ！」





キミと僕の最後の戦場、 あるいは世界が始まる聖戦

the War ends the world /
raises the world

Alt hiz orza et yulis bis mihas xel, the laspha et delis fel mihas xel cs.

この傷だらけの世界には英雄も救世主もない。

Sera.....So Sez lu teo fel nalis pah pheno lef xel.

だから、わたしが魔女となって帝国を消滅させる。

So aves cal pile.

来たれ天の杖

Prologue

The Final Forces of Those Two Countries

““Surrender.””

A shining white chill—

In a world where a sea of trees and earth as far as the eye can see were sealed in ice, a young man gripping his sword and a young woman wearing vivid royal garments simultaneously made that statement.

“...Swordsman of the Empire, shall I hear your name?”

“Iska.”

The young man gripping his sword quickly replied. He had blackish brown hair and a body that was thoroughly tempered from the rigorous training he went through since he was a child. His features were still insufficient for him to be called an adult, but, with a pair of swords—swords with black and white steel at the ready, his gaze was filled with a sharp light just like a naked blade.

“And you?”

“Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. You already realized have you not? The star mage that the Empire calls the 'Ice Witch of Calamity,' is none other than myself.”

The young woman was standing atop enormous ice crystals. Her face was concealed by her headdress inlaid with a lapis lazuli and her voice which resounded through the sea of trees was dignified. She gave an impression of a noble maiden. And then, once more—

“So you cornered Nebulis' star spirit corps all on your own?”

“So you're saying you destroyed the Empire's weapons' reactor core all on your own?”

The young man and woman spoke out at the same time.

“...That's right.”

The first to nod back was the young swordsman. Behind the young man were soldiers wearing robes with bulletproof armour over top of them. Every single one of them, with a single strike—a single sword strike with transcendental precision and speed, had lost consciousness as if sleeping.

“What are you? Just how could a soldier who is not part of the 'Holy Apostles' unit under the direct supervision of the Emperor, let alone even being a commanding officer, overwhelm Nebulis' star spirit corps I wonder?”

“That's what I would like to say.”

So said the young woman known as the Ice Witch of Calamity, and the young swordsman who was looking up at her reciprocated her words.

“On top of getting all the way to the Empire's base on your own, you broke through the defences and destroyed the power reactor. It is not something the average star mage can do.”

The frozen sea of trees and snow in the area let off a chill that would make one think of the ice age from ancient times. And to its rear, was an enormous weapons' reactor core which was unable to retain its original form after being crushed while completely frozen. And the one who wielded such tremendous power that was comparable to a cataclysm, was none other than that young woman.

““Just what are you?””

The mechanized Utopia, the Empire's thoroughly tempered trump card—the Successor of Black Steel, Iska.

The witch's paradise, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency's most prominent witch—the Ice Witch of Calamity, Alice.

The heroes of those two nations confronted each other.

And so, the meeting between those two, and the fate that entwined them, began.

Chapter 1

The Boy and the Witch

1

A cold and dark prison.

With no windows, there was absolutely no sunlight visible.

The only source of illumination was the meagre light from candles, a malicious space where the stench of rusting iron and dust stagnated in the air indefinitely—that was the prison which confined the girl.

Tap, tap, so came the echoes of footsteps.

“Who's there?”

The girl reflexively jumped up from her prison bed.

There was no way she should have heard footsteps in this place. There were no jailers in this prison after all. An unmanned prison—of course there was a reason for that.

First, thanks to a threefold remote surveillance system, the monitoring of the prison interior was perfect. And second, every prisoner in this prison, including the girl, were the taboo existences called 'witches' and 'warlocks.'

—Even when caged up, the degree of danger they posed was too high.

—If they put jailers in place, there was no way to guarantee the lives of said jailers. Thus, it was unmanned.

And yet, what were those footsteps? Who was it? And what intention did they have in drawing nearer?

“...”

The girl reflexively put herself on guard. She was a human born with the unanalytical energy of the stars, the 'star spirit,' and was disparaged and feared as a witch. There was no way anybody who was drawing nearer to her would be bringing her good news.

Was it personal revenge? Or perhaps a notice of execution? Half of the girl was frightened, and the other half hid resolution within her chest as she waited for the footsteps that were drawing nearer—

“Shhh, keep quiet.”

“Eh?”

Without meeting her eyes, 'that' simply said that short phrase, and left the girl with her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Because I'm going to be letting you out.”

What appeared was a young man. A boy with blackish brown hair cut in a disorderly fashion somewhere in his teens. He was wearing the combat clothing of an Imperial soldier, and he had a pair of swords hanging off the belt at his waist—two swords wrapped within black and white steel scabbards.

...Just who was he letting out?

Since the girl was the only one in the cell, she couldn't understand what he was saying right away.

“Don't move. It'll be dangerous if you get close to the bars.”

A slash. A light shined for only a single instant, it was a spectacle that the girl's eyes could not catch at all. The prison bars were cut apart. She only realized that was what happened, the moment after she heard the sound of the fragments falling into the passageway and saw them lying there with her own eyes.

“...You're kidding.”

It was synthesized steel which couldn't even be broken using the star spells of a witch. Those steel bars that couldn't be cut even with large scaled metal working machinery were cut so easily in front of her eyes by that boy. Not only that, it was with a single

sword. However, what surprised the girl more than that feat, was the fact that the bars that were sealing her in were now gone.

“...Why?”

“Even if you ask me why, if I don't cut the bars then you can't escape.”

“...You're... Letting me escape...?”

While staring at the human sized hole in the bars, the girl's eyes sparkled.

“Aren't you a swordsman from the Empire? Moreover you have an armband of the Holy Apostles on your left arm... What is a member of the greatest force in the Empire doing here?”

“I'm surprised you know.”

While sheathing his sword, the boy gave a nod which could be called carefree as he spoke once more.

“The star mages of Nebulis even know of the ranks within the Empire?”

“...I mean...”

The girl cast her gaze downwards. It was a gaze mixed with anxiety and bewilderment.

“You and I are supposed to be mutual enemies. It's obvious that we would know about the Empire... And yet, why are you letting me escape?”

And as the girl asked this with upturned eyes, the boy's reply was—

“You're, still thirteen or fourteen right? Or maybe younger?”

“...Eh?”

“If you're twelve then that would make you three years younger than me. Ah, it'll soon be four years younger.”

The countries of the boy and girl had been in a continuous state of war for over a hundred years. The Empire showed no compassion for restrained witches irrespective

of age or gender. That's how it was supposed to be, but...

"I see you restrained here from time to time, and got curious."

"...?"

"I just think that it's wrong to unconditionally imprison a child like you just because you're a star mage, even though your response to the star spirit is weak within you."

"...Isn't that just the way of the Empire?"

"Un. That's why, the only thing I can do is let you escape like this. This is the first time I'm doing this, but if it goes well I thought I'd let the other children out as well."

And so he beckoned her from outside her cell.

"Quickly. The surveillance system was stopped, but it'll likely be restored in a few moments."

"Ah..."

As he grabbed her hand, the girl let out a small voice. Did he have no fear of touching one who was abhorred and called a witch? Even if there was no fear, did he not feel disgusted?

"Quickly. We're running all the way to the next passage."

While grasping her hand, the boy ran down the unmanned passageway. As she progressed down the passageway while being guided by the boy, the girl eventually arrived at the emergency exit of the prison.

"Once you go through here, you'll reach the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. After that, go along with the flow of people and you'll end up in the shopping district, just move along and follow the electric signboards to guide your way. I think it'll be fine if you head towards the bus which goes to a neutral city. Here. It's only a little though."

The boy handed over hardtack which served as military emergency rations, and Imperial silver coins. After he forced it into her hand, she couldn't even thank him. It all sounded far too good to be true, and made her think it was a trap. She had never heard of an Imperial soldier breaking an Imperial prisoner out of prison, let alone

providing them with food and money.

“Come on, get going.”

“...”

Even while she was anxious, those feelings screaming at her to 'run away' urged her to start dashing. Going through the emergency exit, she emerged outside the prison. From the gate of the capital city, onto a bus which left the Empire's territory, and from there she headed towards the base further away where her comrades were, back to her hometown in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. As as she felt the familiar air of her own country—

“...It was really true.”

The girl knew that the speech and conduct of that young man was not a trap. However, the next day, the unprecedented scandal in the Empire even spread as far as the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.

'The youngest Holy Apostle in history, Iska, was arrested for the crime of treason against the nation by preparing the prison break of a witch. The judgment of lifelong imprisonment has been passed down.'

“You're kidding...”

Gripping onto an informational magazine, the girl trembled slightly. Why? Why did he do that for her when she was supposed to be his enemy? What stirred him up to such an extent? Not knowing the reason behind all that, the girl stood stock still where she was, completely dumbfounded.

—That was just about one year from the 'present.'

It had been a year since the unprecedented scandal of a witch's prison break. And once more, the world would recall that young man's name, triggered by the chance meeting between the Successor of Black Steel Iska, and the Ice Witch of Calamity Alice—

“The prisoner Iska, is acquitted”

The Imperial Diet—the highest decision making body in the 'Empire' which boasted of holding the world's largest territory, were making a decision on a single agenda item.

“Raise your head, Iska. It's the first taste of the outside world in a year. How does the sun feel as it pours over you?”

“...It's dazzling.”

With both his hands and feet bound, the young man—Iska, squinted as he looked up at the sun coming through the skylight. It was a vast parliament building. And standing atop a podium right at its centre, Iska looked around at the eight men and women looking down on him.

The Eight Grand Apostles.

They were the eight supreme leaders who supervised the Imperial Diet. The people themselves did not show their faces to the parliament in person, and only a vague silhouette of their faces could be seen on a monitor installed on the wall to the front.

“You don't have a very refreshed countenance though?”

“...I half, don't believe it. You're saying I'm acquitted?”

“Reasonably so. It seems that you are self aware of the weight of the crime you committed. That incident where you let loose the witch that we had captured was a serious blow to us.”

“This time, we have prepared an opportunity for you to atone for such a serious crime.”

“What do you mean?”

Iska reflexively knit his brows. One year ago, he was imprisoned as the culprit who broke a witch out of prison, was stripped of his status as one of the Holy Apostles, and was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment.

...So why was he being acquitted?

Being acquitted after only a single year was far too good a story. The Eight Grand Apostles on the monitor before his eyes were definitely not people with such deep compassion.

"In return for a pardon, you're saying I must take part in some sort of mission...?"

"A good guess. This also applies to your preparations for the witch's escape, but it seems your mind isn't all that bad."

The Eight Grand Apostles let out a quiet laugh.

"I can only use a sword."

"Such an unsubstantiated assessment is not quite accurate. You should be putting it in another way. It isn't that you can only use a sword, it's that as long as you have a sword, it is enough."

It wasn't sarcasm. The reason that the greatest authorities in the world's largest nation called a single boy to parliament to pass down a direct order, was none other than that.

"On to the main issue at hand. What we command you to do is not all that considerable a thing. We will simply have you do what you must for your own sake. In other words, overthrow a witch."

"A witch?"

"This is information from our spies hiding in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. It was determined that a single witch was dispatched from the Imperial Household Agency towards the Empire's base."

"That's... I feel like that's an everyday occurrence on the front line."

"It is not just any witch. It's a direct descendent of the Great Witch Nebulis, a 'pure blood.'"

"A pure blood!?"

Hearing that word come from the Eight Grand Apostles, Iska unintentionally opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“...That's a formidable enemy.”

“That is exactly why you are being acquitted.”

The Eight Grand Apostles continued to speak indifferently.

“The Great Witch Nebulis who turned our Empire into a sea of flames once before. You know that blood line is called the 'pure blood,' and they are all endowed with powerful star spirit correct?”

“Yes. I've fought against them many times already after all.”

“The opponent this time, is an especially powerful one even among those. The Ice Witch of Calamity—while you have been imprisoned for the past year, she broke through the front line in northern Yubel all on her own. Even our newest weapons that we had stationed there were stolen by the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.”

“...That Yubel front line, all on her own?”

While Iska was imprisoned, he had at least heard rumours that a witch entrusted with unbelievable star spirit had appeared.

“In a head on battle, even the Holy Apostles would be forced into a difficult fight. Having said that, the unit currently stationed at the front line is unreliable. And that's where you come in.”

“The youngest Holy Apostle in all history, Iska, we have high expectations of you.”

“...That's, former, Holy Apostle. I was just demoted a year ago due to the incident.”

At the age of fifteen, he ascended to the ranks of the unit which the Emperor directly supervised as his guards. He was praised as a hero who rose through the ranks in an unprecedented manner... Or he should have been.

“If you so desire, then you may retake your seat among the Holy Apostles. At any rate, you studied under that man known as the strongest, and have inherited the star sword, the 'Successor of Black Steel.’”

The floor at Iska's feet split apart, and a mechanism brought a pedestal up in front of him.

—A pair of swords.

A sword sheathed inside a black steel scabbard. And a sword sheathed inside a white steel scabbard.

“These are the star swords you inherited from that man. Take them.”

“Is that alright?”

“These swords can only bring out their powers when one who is qualified touches them. They are swords that only you can use.”

And at that time, the manacles that had been binding Iska's hands and feet came apart with a clang.

“Iska, from this moment on, you are a free man. A convoy to the front line has been prepared for you in seventeen hours. Make your preparations until then. If you are in need of anything, then it will be prepared. Armaments, personnel, funds, food, medical treatment, whatever you need, we will provide all of it.”

They would provide everything. As he they proposed such extraordinary measures for him, Iska gave an immediate reply without hesitation.

“There are three members I would like in my unit.”

“Let us hear it.”

“Captain Mismis Klass. The sniper Jhin Syulargun. And the engineer Nene Alkastone. I would like for these three to be gathered.”

The second sector of the Imperial Capital.

Within the Imperial Capital which was surrounded by massive steel walls, it was the sector which displayed the most prosperous businesses. In the restaurant 'Powder Base' located in a corner in front of the plaza—

“Nene-chan, where can we sit?”

“Nene-chan, the meal we ordered still hasn't come though.”

“Nene-chan—”

“Yes! Yes! I'll be right there!”

Gulping down some bread in a corner of the kitchen that she had been nibbling on for lunch, Nene stood up in a fluster. Putting on her employee's apron in a hurry, she ran over to the many customers in the flourishing restaurant.

Nene Alkastone—

She had voluminous red hair tied up in a ponytail, a pair of big blue eyes as well as a bright and cheerful smile. She was a fifteen year old girl who gave off a cheerful impression. Tightly wrapped around her healthy body was a tank top used for working out and hot pants which exposed her upper thighs. That sort of sporty clothing suited her well.

“Yes! Yees! Dear customer, are you on... Ah!”

A silver haired boy stood at the entrance of the restaurant. Upon seeing his figure, Nene became lively and rushed over to him.

“Jhin-nii-chan!? Wawaa, that makes me happy. Did you come to see Nene?”

“We just met a while ago though.”

“Eeeh? Then are you a customer? If that's the case, if you wait an hour or so the customers should thin out and it'll be less crowded and give off a pleasant feeling.

Today's specialty is, ummm."

"Unfortunately, I've already eaten."

In response to Nene's upturned eyes, the young man replied in an indifferent and sober tone.

Jhin Syulargun.

He was a young man with silver hair standing on end, a pair of sharp grey eyes and masculine features. He wore grey battle garments woven with fibre optics and had a rifle case for a sniper rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Sooo, what did you come here for today?"

"A message."

"Heh?"

"That guy was acquitted. Right now, he returned to the dorm for the first time in a year and is urgently making preparations."

After hearing Jhin's words, Nene let her gaze wander around in the air for a while, and then...

"...AH!"

Her eyes starting sparkling as she thought of someone.

"You can't mean."

"It's Iska."

"YOU'RE KIDDIIIIIIIIING!? Eh, really? You're not lying right?"

Forgetting that her voice would resound through the restaurant, Nene let out a shriek.

"If you have time to be happy about, then get ready."

"I see, by get ready you mean for the celebration right?"

Nene began hopping up and down in joy, but Jhin's tone remained completely curt.

"We'll be departing at midnight and taking a transport vehicle to the front line."

"...Heh? Transport vehicle? Front line?"

"We're being dispatched."

"EH!? Wait a sec Jhin-nii-chan! Nene has her part time job right into the evening you know!?"

"Give it up. It's beyond your wildest dreams to work an honest job."

As he let out a breath which was similar to a sigh, Jhin turned his back on her.

"As long as this worthless war between the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency continues that is."



The military gate of the Imperial Capital.

As a veil of darkness descended over the Imperial Capital and thinly died it ink black, the illumination from the watchtowers shined down dazzlingly on the large gate from the front. Looking up at the sky from the ground next to it, the dim starlight could be seen flickering in the distance.

"Cold."

The cold night wind traced down the nape of his neck.

"...This also applied to the morning sun, but it's been a year since I've seen this kind of starry sky huh."

Popping up the collar of his windbreaker used for battle, Iska grumbled with a slightly bitter smile. He had thought that he would never see the morning sun or the stars ever again.

"But just as I get out I'm headed to a life or death battle, I may regret it being safer just to stay in prison for the rest of my life though... Right!"

Iska heaved the backpack he was carrying into the back of the transport vehicle. Though the backpack let out an impressive thud, Iska's baggage was classified on the light side. The only weapons he was bringing were the swords at his waist. Other than that there was medical supplies and small communication equipment. A sniper would have to add on the equipment to maintain their gun as well as a large quantity of ammunition, and an intelligence officer would have to bring large scaled communication equipment.

“Let's see, the time is—”

“There's still four minutes and thirty seconds until the appointed meeting time.”

As Iska looked over his shoulder, he saw the figure of a young man with silver hair being illuminated by a street light. It was a sniper carrying a rifle case over his left shoulder.

“Hey, Jhin. You saved me this afternoon by getting in contact with Nene and Captain Mismis.”

“I'm used to your sudden requests. Just like when you overenthusiastically caused that witch's prison break incident a year ago.”

“Uu... Th-that's why I apologized for it this morning.”

“Your follow through is too naive. 'No matter what you do, do it with a means of absolute certainty. If you do not expect it to be absolutely certain, wait for the right time.' Even though Master had told you this so frequently...”

Letting a grandiose sigh, Jhin heaved his baggage into the car.

“The way those two were shaken when you were arrested was simply out of this world.”

“You mean Nene and Captain Mismis?”

“They were just that much happier to hear of your acquittal though. Well, speak of the devil.”

In the direction that Jhin pointed out with his eyes, the shine of headlights was closing in with terrifying momentum. It was a buggy that was kicking up a dense cloud of

sand. And then the sounds of harsh braking rang in the night air where many soldiers should have been sound asleep.

“ISKA-NII, CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR ACQUIT—————!”

Just as the buggy came to a stop, a young woman with a red ponytail fastened up behind her leaped out of the car.

“CONGRATS CONGRATS CONGRATS—————!”

“Nene!?”

Iska caught Nene as she dove in and clung to him.

“You don't have to be so happy about it... Well, I also feel sorry for having worried you though.”

“Uun, it's not Iska-nii's fault. More importantly, thank goodness.”

Nene sniffled as she looked up at him with upturned teary eyes.

“Do you understand just how much Nene was worried about Iska-nii!? I couldn't even swallow food properly for a month, I lost three kilos you know?”

“And yet, as a backlash, you gained five kilos by binge eating grilled meat.”

“How does Jhin-nii-chan know about that!?”

As Jhin spoke out in an absent minded tone, Nene turned her head over her shoulder.

“...Ah, looks like the Captain is here too. Oooooi, Captain! Over here! Over here!”

Nene waved her hand in the direction of the shopping district. Despite it being the dead of the night, the dazzling lights of the city served as a backdrop as a young woman wearing the Imperial battle uniform ran down the streets towards them.

“E-e-everyone——... Haa... Haa... S-sorry, I'm late...”

“...You run slow as always huh.”

Jhin let out a sigh in exasperation. Was her rucksack just heavy, or was her stamina simply lacking? The girl's footsteps as she ran were staggering to the point where it felt like she would collapse at any moment.

“Jhin, the Captain is the same as always?”

“There's no change. In the bad sense.”

Thud.

“Ah, she fell.”

Nene muttered quickly to herself.



On completely even ground without even a single pebble around, she tumbled over grandly. But even so, she stood back up—or so they thought, for some reason she just crouched down right on the spot.

“...*sniff*. Sorry... Why, am I so clumsy I wonder? Even my subordinates and superiors always get angry at me. Maybe, I'm just not suited to be in the military? Right? Mr. Street Light? Doesn't Mr. Street Light think so as well?”

For some reason, the girl was talking to the street light right in front of her.

“...Maybe I should just quit.”

“Don't quiiiiiiiiiiiiit!?”

As the girl made that turbulent declaration with resignation, Iska ran up to her in a mad rush.

“You can't go back Captain! Actually, do you normally get discouraged after coming so far!?”

“Ah, it's Iska-kun.”

Hearing Iska call out to her, the petite girl's expression suddenly brightened up. With a smaller stature than Nene, her smile overflowed with a childish charm. She had pale blue hair tied up in a braid with wavy bangs. Her complexion was good and she had a nice small mouth. She gave off the impression of a very adorable child.

“Waa, it's been a super long time. Didn't you grow a little taller?”

“I-is that so?”

“Unun. I also drink milk every day so that I can grow taller, but I guess in the end a little girl like me can't win in the height department huh.”

“What's with the little girl? Despite being well past that age.” “Wh-what are you saying Jhin-kun!?”

Jhin nonchalantly cut into their conversation as he raised an eyebrow towards the petite girl... No, woman.

Captain Mismis Klass—she looked even younger than the fifteen year old Nene, but in reality she was the oldest among them.

“I’m still twenty two you know~. Just the other day I even got into the movie theatre paying the child fare!”

“...Captain, shouldn't you honestly pay the adult fare in that case?”

“Aah, but it kinda made me happy.”

Mismis wiped away her tears that had spilled out with the tip of her finger.

“Iska-kun is an honest and good kid as always. Nene-chan has become even cuter and more beautiful. And even Jhin-kun's foul mouth is somehow nostalgic, today, at least.”

“Oi, wait a sec—”

“After a whole year, it's the reformation of the 3rd Defence Division Unit 907!”

Not realizing that Jhin had something he wanted to say, Captain Mismis energetically thrust her fist into the air.

“So? So? I heard about the sudden dispatch order, but what kind of mission is it this time?”

“The subjugation of a witch. That's all the 3rd Defence Division does right?”

“Eh?”

At Jhin's concise reply, Mismis suddenly stopped moving.

“The target is the direct descendent of the Great Witch Nebulis, a 'pure blood'—if I say it is the Ice Witch of Calamity, then Captain should understand. It's the big shot that appeared around here recently.”

“The Ice Witch of Calamity!?”

No sooner than letting out a scream, her face turned white as a sheet and she began trembling as her teeth clattered.

“I-I-I-Iska-kun, is that true!?”

“Yes. It seems that the reason I was acquitted was to capture that star mage.”

“...Achaa...”

The young Captain was left at her wit's end.

“Iska-kun, that, you got setup by the Eight Grand Apostles...”

“What do you mean?”

“In the first place, the Ice Witch of Calamity is a star mage who appeared after Iska-kun was imprisoned, so it's obvious that you don't know about her huh.”

With a completely tense expression, Mismis continued speaking.

“The first time she appeared was at the northern Yubel front line I think. She broke through that front line singlehandedly and returned without any injuries. Three months ago when she appeared at the Vuiril plains, the Holy Apostles were dispatched, but even so they were unable to capture her. There still isn't much information, but rumours say that even throughout history she's the strongest star mage. Right, Jhin-kun?”

“But conversely, they also don't know about the soldier known as Iska.”

Jhin lifted up and corrected the strap that was carrying his rifle case on his shoulder.

“Whether it is good or bad luck, not much information about you has reached the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. After ascending to the Holy Apostles, you never showed up on the battlefield once and were demoted to a lower ranked soldier after that. From their perspective, they see you as just the rank and file, but the moment they open the lid and look, they'll end up being attacked with the strength on level with the Holy Apostles. In other words—”

“We can catch them off guard?”

“That's probably what the Eight Grand Apostles predicted. Having said that, since they're depending on you after having you imprisoned, even the big shots are probably seriously at a loss at what to do about it.”

“The Ice Witch of Calamity huh...”

With a fierce wind pushing at his back, Iska got into the back of the transport vehicle.

“Iska-nii, we're leaving already?”

The one to sit in the driver's seat in high spirits was Nene. She had one hand gripping the controls tightly and her other hand was already grasping the communication device.

“This is the 3rd Division Unit 907. Now departing~! Come on Captain Mismis, get in, get in.”

“Wawaa, wait a minute Nene-chan!”

The squad Captain jumped into the transport vehicle that had come to life in a panic.

“I-Iska-kun, a-are you really taking on this mission...?”

“Of course. To me, this is an opportunity after all.”

Passing through the exit from Imperial territory at an intense speed, the armoured car proceeded down the sandy road. Looking back at the dim lights from the Imperial Capital through the two fold glass windows, Iska made a slight, yet certainly resolute nod.

“...Iska-kun, could it be that you'll be going back to prison if you fail this mission?”

“I'm making sure not to think about that.”

Iska returned a bittersweet smile to Mismis' reserved question.

“To bring a full stop to this worthless war. One year ago and even now, that's all I've ever been thinking about.”

Roughly one hundred years ago.

In the fortified domain of the 'Heaven's Empire'—

The large country commonly referred to as simply the 'Empire,' seized hegemony of the world. The Empire prospered alongside an advanced mechanical civilization, but one day, they touched upon the 'secret of the stars.' A geological survey team had discovered that deep underground.

—The unanalytical energy that was emitted from the depths of the stars, 'star spirit.'

Even now, it was unknown why such a thing was lying dormant within the stars. The only thing that was certain, was that humans had a disposition to be possessed by the star spirit. At first, it was the geological survey team which was showered in the gushing star spirit. And following that, the researchers who were studying it. People who conceived star spirit had an unidentifiable birthmark formed on a portion of their body, and along with that, they gained powers much akin to magic straight out of a story book. An ominous birthmark, and paranormal powers.

'...Monsters.'

Women who conceived star spirit were called 'witches,' the men were 'warlocks.'

The populace of the Empire feared such overwhelming power, and it wasn't long before they began to persecute those who conceived star spirit.

A banner of revolution against the Empire.

The young woman who was endowed with the strongest star spirit—the Great Witch Nebulis, turned the Empire into a sea of fire, and then founded a nation where those who conceived star spirit could live, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.

Declaring that star spirit would provide new possibilities for humanity, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency became obsessed with implacable vengeance for the persecution their ancestors suffered. The war between two major powers of the world showed no signs of quieting down even a hundred years later at the present time.

“—Alice-sama.”

As her attendant moderately touched her shoulder, the young woman with blonde hair suddenly came to her senses.

“Are you alright? Do you feel bad?”

“Uun. Sorry, I was just thinking a little about something.”

Pinning down her hair fluttering to the side from the fierce gust of wind, the girl turned her head towards her attendant.

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX—

She was a beautiful girl wearing royal garments. Her blonde hair shining in the sunlight flowed in the wind like silk threads, her ruby coloured eyes looked gallant and vigorous. Her limbs were a transparent white like porcelain, and her facial features, the fair complexion of her lips, and the blush to her cheeks brought about an elegant sense of sex appeal.

“Thank you, Rin. It is no good if I do not properly concentrate is it?”

“No. I'm sure there are things for Alice-sama to think about, there are no problems.”

Replying with a bittersweet smile, was a young woman with bright brown hair split up and tied to the left and right—Rin.

Rin Vispose.

She was a girl who belonged to the family which served as attendants for the Nebulis royal family. She was the close aide of the princess of the Imperial Household Agency, Alice, and the only person that she could speak to closely.

“How much longer will it take I wonder?”

“We have passed the border. All that is left is to head to the front. It shouldn't take more than half an hour.”

Their current altitude was two thousand metres. Alice and Rin were riding atop a huge and strange bird. Every time the strange bird flapped its wings, a gust of wind would

blow and cause Alice's hair and royal garments to flutter greatly.

“We don't know when the long range snipers of the Empire will take aim at us. Do be careful.”

“They're already aiming at us.”

In contrast to her declaration filled with composure, Alice silently bit down on his lips.

“I'm already used to it... Being aimed at with guns, and being cursed at as the 'Ice Witch of Calamity.'”

The Great Witch Nebulis who founded the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. Alice was the current queen's second daughter and was one who had the full fledged right to inherit the crown. At the same time, she was extolled as the trump card star mage of the Imperial Household Agency at the age of seventeen. In the Empire, they used derogatory words like witch and warlock, but after Alice's ancestors claimed independence from the Empire, they gave themselves the name of star mages.

“Rin, is my target the same as always?”

“Yes. It is the destruction of the base that the Empire has established on the front line.”

Rin spoke as her tied up hair to the left and right vigorously fluttered about.

“We've received information from our comrades fighting on the front line that the Empire is constructing a new model of weapon power reactor. If they complete it, they would be able to deliver mid ranged weapons unilaterally to that base, and we would have no choice but to retreat.”

“It's simple to destroy it before they finish building it, but... Would it be bad for us to just keep the momentum and push into Imperial territory? Even though it would be easy for me and you.”

This was a source of discontent for Alice. Having conceived a particularly powerful star spirit among all star mages, she had enough power to influence the war situation all on her own. And yet, her mother the Queen ordered her only to destroy the base, and then immediately return after its destruction.

“Why won't mother approve of me charging in I wonder... Even though there's another

star mage with me...”

“Her Majesty the Queen is surely extremely worried about you.”

Rin put her hand up to her mouth and suddenly began laughing.

“Alice-sama is a candidate to be the future Queen after all. In truth, rather than charging into the enemy camp, you should be studying how to be a good leader. Is she not always saying that instead of going out to plays and concerts between battles, she would like you to be studying as much as possible within the castle?”

“You'll have to excuse me from such boredom. I can study how to be a good leader after the world is at peace.”

“Naturally, I also think that you have a point.”

“Right?”

Alice returned a smile to Rin as she nodded. However, she immediately wiped that smile off her face, and Alice quietly made a declaration to herself with a firm resolve.

“First is overthrowing the Empire. I'll knock down that country, and create a world where nobody will be persecuted.”

Red dirt spread out over the plains. Beyond there, a massive forest which buried the horizon came into sight.

The Nelka woodlands.

It lied on the boundary line between the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. Its defining characteristic were the Nelka trees which grew to a height all the way up to thirty metres. It was said that fifteen percent of the forests in the world were destroyed by fire due to the hundred years of war, but this was one of the scarce bands of forest that lied unravaged by wartime destruction.

“...Fuwaa, those sure are huge trees.”

Looking up at the Nelka trees that seemed to extend and thrust into the skies, Mismis spoke out absentmindedly.

“This is my first time seeing such huge trees.”

“Captain Mismis, you should have been to this base with me before though. On another mission.”

“Huh, did we?”

As the child faced woman with blue hair tilted her head to the side, Iska also tilted his own head to the side.

“You're not telling me that you forgot are you? Even though we went through so much trouble with the mission at the time.”

“Eh!? Ahaha... Th-there's no way I did. Even I at least remember the places I went to for missions. Aaah, how nostalgic the Schwartz plains are.”

“The name is wrong!? And just how is this forest a plain!?”

“I-it's a joke! Obviously I remember it perfectly!”

“...I'm super worried.”

“It's fine, it's fine. Just leave it to me!”

The Captain's mouth was strained.

“By the way Iska-kun, I'm immediately curious about this thing though.”

Beyond her tense gaze, was a mechanical furnace producing shrill driving force sounds.

A weapon power reactor.

From its outward appearance, it resembled an enormous incinerator. It was the energy source which powered the large quantity of manufactured heavy weapons that the Empire's forces possessed, as well as the specially designed and manufactured weapons of destruction from the laboratory in the Imperial Capital.

“This is a new model right?”

“I think so. Last time we came, there wasn't anything like this here.”

Standing next to Mismis, Iska looked up and gazed at the weapon power reactor.

The Nelka strategic base.

It was a base that was constructed within this sea of trees. It was positioned only three kilometres away from the front line where the star spirit corps from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency was stationed, but thanks to the large trees surrounding it, they were able to hide the existence of the base.

“I wonder why? Even though there's such a large reactor here, the amount of forces stationed here is quite small?”

The power reactor continued to emit steam. Around it were tents and a communication base. From the units that they could see running around in a hurry on their way in, just as Mismis said, there weren't enough people present for a strategic base.

“Aah, that's probably—”

Just as Iska was about to speak...

“I'm baaack~!”

From between the large trees, a girl with tied up red hair suddenly appeared.

“Waa...! That was startling... Nene-chan, don't surprise me like that.”

“I finished handing over the transport vehicle. Also, I found the commanding officer of this base in that tent over there. I went to give him a greeting and have a chat, but it seems this reactor is incomplete.”

Nene tapped on the side of the power reactor.

“Well, it's still in the experimental phase so the sound it makes is amazing huh. Actually it was supposed to have been completed, but since there have been a lot of attacks from the star mages lately, the personnel have been dedicated to the defence of the front line over completing the power reactor. Looks like that's the reason there aren't many people in the base itself.”

Behind her innocent eyes lied the brilliance of an intellect. Nene was a super first class engineer, and while assigned to the military academy, due to her inquisitive mind which knew no end, she published thesis after thesis, and was unprecedentedly scouted by the Imperial Capital's Weapon Supremacy Development Department.

If it wasn't for the request to include her in the unit with Iska and Jhin, Nene would likely be working full time as an inventor in the Imperial Capital.

“I thought it was strange from the start. This power reactor's driving force vibrates too much, the sound of the driving force is also jarring.”

“Heeh, as expected of Nene-chan.”

“Also the steam being exhausted from it is discoloured and stinks. Even though the pressure device is running, the control ring is pretty much fixed at its upper limit too. It's also unusual for the number three and number seven of the seven control lamps to be on at the same time. On top of that—”

“...Th-that's enough right, Nene-chan?”

Seeing that Nene didn't know how to stop, Mismis tried to suppress her. And to their side...

“ ... ”

“Iska-nii, what's wrong? Just staring like that.”

Finding Iska's behaviour strange, Nene questioned him, and Iska pointed to the power reactor before him with his eyes.

“When this is completed, I was just thinking that a lot of star mages are going to be hurt again...”

From the perspective of a normal person, star spirit power was similar to magic. Its nature and the abilities that came out of it were extremely varied, but with powerful star spirit, it wasn't unusual for the small arms used by an Imperial unit to be completely useless. Iska knew this was a weapon so that they could compete against such star mages, but...

“It's a vicious circle.”

The one to say that, was the one carrying a sniper rifle on his shoulder, Jhin.

“The Empire creates power reactors. The Imperial Household Agency charges in to destroy them. This side gets defeated. In retaliation they develop stronger weapons and power reactors. The star mages get defeated. The world is made up of that cycle which repeated itself over the last hundred years... That's, just a second hand opinion from Master though.”

And then he let out a big sigh.

“No matter what triggered the war, the only reason this war has dragged on so long is because of sentimental arguments. After it has gone on for so long, nobody will be able to stop it using reason. Even if someone takes on the role of being resented, there's no other way than having someone forcibly sever the cycle.”

“Sever, huh...”

“It's just one method of attaining peace that a certain someone thought of. Whether or not it can actually be done is a different matter.”

Passing in front of Nene, Jhin came to an abrupt stop in front of Iska.

“It doesn't really need to be said after all this time, but the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency is a country ruled by the descendants of the Great Witch Nebulis. It is

theorized that the reason for that is because every single member of the royal bloodline carry extremely powerful star spirit.”

The one considered to be at the peak of the star mages, was a direct descendant of the Great Witch Nebulis. There were many descendants of Nebulis who couldn't even be compared to other star mages. This was why the Imperial Diet labelled them as 'pure blood' and were particularly vigilant of them.

“And we're to capture one of those pure blood. Normally you wouldn't even think of that, right Captain?”

“U-un... It's hard huh... It's probably harder than capturing ten other star mages after all.”

“Rather than ten, it's more like it's harder than catching a thousand.”

As the captain timidly replied, the sniper quickly shook his head to the side.

“In all one hundred years that this war has gone on for, there isn't a single record of a pure blood being captured. It took all the effort of the past Holy Apostles just to drive them back. That just shows how Nebulis' bloodline is on an entirely different magnitude of strength.”

“That's exactly why—”

Following after Jhin's explanation, Iska quietly nodded.

“If a pure blood is captured, I think the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency would be forced to comply with peace talks.”

“I've heard that a thousand times over.”

The reply that came out of his friend for ten years, was a sigh mixed with exasperation.

“Currently, both the Empire and Nebulis aren't even thinking of peace talks. In that case, capturing a VIP from the other side and using that to threaten them into peace talks, is Iska's idea.”

“...But Jhin-kun?”

The captain spoke in a somewhat anxious tone.

“If a pure blood witch is captured, then the Empire will likely be in an advantageous position. I don't think the Eight Grand Apostles would put forth such a generous negotiation offer. Rather than equal peace talks, it wouldn't be strange if they threatened to execute the hostage unless they agreed to an unconditional surrender right?”

“That's why Iska needs to capture the pure blood with his own hands.”

It was a condition for the two countries to negotiate peace talks on as even a playing field as possible. If the Eight Grand Apostles were to suggest such a thing, Iska would let loose the pure blood he caught himself.

“There's a precedence with that case one year ago where he broke a witch out of jail after all. If Iska threatens to let a witch free as a threat, they can't take it as a joke. Rather, how many times have I made this explanation to you, Captain?”

“A-ahaha... Sorry, I'm bad at remembering things.”

Being stared at by Jhin who had folded his arms, Captain Mismis tried to gloss it over with a laugh.

“I don't have any objections to our objective of capturing a pure blood star mage as the squad captain... I do find a pure blood kinda scary though.”

“Once Iska-nii decides something he's awfully stubborn about it after all~.”

Nene then tightly clung onto Iska's back.

“But it'll be fine, Nene will properly protect Iska-nii! When Iska-nii is in trouble, Nene will properly support him from behind—”

“Come on, let's go, Nene. Leave your bridal play with Iska for after we return the Imperial Capital.”

“Ouch! Wait a sec, Jhin-nii-chan!”

Jhin grabbed the end of Nene's ponytail and started walking.

“You'll tear my ponytail off...”

“It won't tear. Human hair is sturdier than copper wire of the same width.”

“I've never heard of such a useless fact~!”

While pinning down the top of her head, Nene reluctantly began walking. Captain Mismis then called out to stop them.

“Wait a minute Jhin-kun! We still haven't made contact with the front line troops. If we make any moves without telling them then they will get angry at us.”

“I already did that. While a certain someone was simply admiring the weapon power reactor.”

“So quickly!?”

“There has been no fighting yesterday or today. The sniping teams spotted scouts from the star spirit corps several times, but there didn't seem to be anyone resembling the Ice Witch of Calamity... So they said.”

“...Will she really come?”

“There's the possibility that she will perform a surprise attack targeting the power reactor before long.”

Jhin walked further into the sea of trees. In the direction he was walking, was a military car concealed within the thickets.

“The front line troops said 'We welcome reinforcements. We'd like to request you link up with us right away.' That's just how vigilant against the Ice Witch of Calamity they are. Iska, you said that she was a pure blood right?”

“I don't think it's a mistake. The Eight Grand Apostles asserted that fact.”

'We will simply have you do what you must for your own sake. In other words, overthrow a witch.'

'It is not just any witch. It's a direct descendent of the Great Witch Nebulis, a 'pure blood.'

“It'll be extremely difficult, but if we capture the Ice Witch of Calamity it should serve as sufficient material for peace talks.”

“That's how it is. Nene, get the car ready. We're linking up with the front line.”

“Let's get going!”

Following after Jhin's shout, the girl in the driver's seat grabbed the shift lever. At the same time, the tires began spinning at an intense speed. The open top car carrying the four of them rushed through the forest path crowded by trees at a terrifying speed.

“Kyaaun!?”

Letting out a scream resembling a dog, Captain Mismis skillfully tumbled in the passenger's seat.

“Nene-chan Nene-chan!? Drive more safely!”

“It's fine~ it's fine~. Nene can drive like this with my eyes closed.”

“I'm begging you, keep your eyes open——!?”

On top of visibility being poor through Nelka's enormous trees and thickets, the tree roots sticking out of the ground made it extremely uneven. It couldn't be helped that Mismis was panicking as the car was being recklessly driven down such a trackless path.

“I-It's been a while since I've been this tense after all huh... Can she really keep it under control?”

“It can't be helped to be filled with concern.”

From the rear seat, Jhin spoke rapidly. And while staring intently at the into the depths of sea of trees...

“Because of his imprisonment, Iska's body has dulled. I've also been away from the squad, and Nene is also half retired and was gathering funds by doing part time jobs. Our combat senses have dulled. On such a naturally convalescent state, can we really put up a fight against the Ice Witch of Calamity—right?”

“...U-un.”

“I'm relying on you. It's exactly at such times that Captain can display your skills after all.”

Iska gave a reliable nod towards the female officer in the front seat.

“Jhin, Nene and I aren't used to acting with strict squads, but Captain Mismis is different. I believe in her ability to make sound judgment for the squad while maintaining order after all.”

“That's how it is. Well, just wait and see. Leave the battle against the star mages to us, you just need to give us orders from behind.”

“Jhin-kun! Iska-kun!”

The captain wiped away her tears with a sniffle.

“I'm so happy. The two of you have become proper adults... Especially Jhin-kun, in a single year you've become such a kind child!”

“I'm only only worried about the Captain getting fired up and randomly shooting a gun wildly. It's better for the Captain to give orders from behind than taking on the risk of getting killed by someone who is supposed to be an ally.”

“Mukiii—!?”

Captain Mismis attacked Jhin from the passenger's seat. Watching their little exchange from the side, Nene turned towards them from the driver's seat like she was enjoying it.

“Jhin-nii-chan, even though you say that kinda thing, when the squad was disbanded and the Captain was feeling down, wasn't Jhin-nii-chan the one who came to Nene and said 'Take that idiot out for barbecue and cheer her up?'”

Jhin likely wanted to tell her to look in front of her as she drove, but though he wanted to say that, Jhin held back his words. And then...

“Jump!”

Both Iska and Jhin who were sitting in the back seat stood up as they yelled that.

“Eh!? Eh!?”

“Captain, hold on tight.”

Nene dove out of the driver's seat while holding on to Mismis tightly. Jhin escaped the car from the right side seat while carrying his sniper rifle, and verifying they had all moved, Iska also leaped from the left side seat. Immediately following that, the sturdy military car was swallowed in a bright red flame.

“Is it a Nebulis star spirit corps?”

Twisting and spinning in the air, Iska fell to his knees on the ground while drawing both swords from the back of his belt. Following that, Nene and Mismis finished landing to his rear.

“No way!? This is still Imperial territory!”

“The front line defences have been breached. There's probably a powerful star mage present.—Nene.”

“Iska-nii, the comms are up!”

Nene pressed a palm sized communication device to her ear.

“There's a reinforcement request out to all forces from the Nelka military camp's communication team!”

“...We're short on time huh. The surprise attack is one thing, but if we don't hold back the front line then a large force of star mages will rush in vigorously.”

As Jhin landed, he released the safety device on the rifle on his shoulder, and the thickets behind him swayed greatly.

“Jhin, fall back!”

And at the same time, an enormous wall of fire came in from Jhin's rear. And in an instant, Iska used his black sword to bisect the crimson wall clean in two...

“...He cut up the star spirit's fire!?”

Two star mages jumped out from the thickets.

Nebulis star spirit corps.

They wore silver outfits using woven metal fibres. For a short period of time, it was clothing that was able to withstand a volley of machine gun fire. The joints between the armoured portion that a gun would work against wasn't even a centimetre large. If he missed the joints, even Jhin's sniper rifle wouldn't have much of an effect.

“T-two star mages!? Everyone be careful!”

“I can tell just from looking that there's two of them. Rather than warning us, worry about yourself. Also don't just give out orders loudly, you'll reveal who the captain here is in an instant. Also—”

“I don't need such a surge of quips you know!?”

“Then be quiet and step back.”

Giving a sidelong glance at Mismis half on the verge of tears, Jhin pointed his rifle at the two star mages in front of him who weren't even ten metres away. Instead of continuing to berate Mismis, Jhin grabbed the grip of his rifle without hesitation. Gunfire burst out at short range. And despite that, the two star mages didn't make the slightest movement.

— The bullet was suspended in midair.

Stopping in the air as if time had stopped, several seconds later, the bullet which used up all of the kinetic energy bestowed to it gently fell to the ground.

“Like I thought. They were making composed expressions at having a gun pointed at them after all.”

Jhin scowled at the man who didn't move at all.

“So you're your friend's shield huh? A subspecies of a wind star spirit right? The bullet that was suspended was dulled slightly. It's the same phenomenon as when a bullet is repelled by a wall of compressed air. And so, that woman has a fire star spirit and was

the one who reduced our car to a piece of junk.”

The two star mages stood in silence.

Yes, these were the paranormal beings that the Empire feared as 'witches' and 'warlocks.' They were endowed with star spirits that possessed the overwhelming destructive force of destroying an Imperial building, and could even create a defensive wall that could render a hail of bullets ineffective. Even a single Nebulis star spirit corps had the power to collapse the front line of the Empire.

“How lonely. The Imperial reinforcements were only four people?”

The woman with her hood hung low over her eyes spoke with a derisive tone.

“Now then. Let's quickly clean this up and bring down the next unit.”

The ground squirmed. With a loud thud, the ground caved in and star spirit corps members popped out of the ground one after the other.

“You may freely choose whether you surrender or get annihilated.”

“Eh? Wh-why... When did this many!?”

There were eight of them in every directions, and two before them. As the full force of ten people made their entrance, Mismis' expression became pale.

“Jhin-kun, Iska-kun!”

“Aaah... An earth lineage star spirit? I see, if you dig through the ground then we can't sense your presence huh.”

“It's quite the large scaled technique, there's quite the powerful star mage among them.”

“Why are you two so calm!?”

“It's an event that we assumed would happen after all.—Iska.”

Jhin simply replied as he quickly exchanged look with Iska.

“Those star swords that the Eight Grand Apostles confiscated from you, you're not holding onto fakes right now right?”

“They're real. I can tell from touching them.”

“So, can you cut them all down?”

“If my senses have returned. It could be a little hard right now. That's how it is, so quietly lend me your strength.”

Iska readied both his sword and took a single step back. He then turned towards the girl who had stepped forward in response.

“Nene.”

“Positional information, transfer complete—”

The young girl with a pony tail opened her palm straight ahead into the empty air.



A mechanical ring was placed on her finger. And the moment the star spirit corps had realized this, the gunfire had already started.

“Satellite 'Star of Tetra Byblos,' fire anti-star spirit grenades.”

Grenades poured down from the sky. The shots from the sky ruptured the Nelka trees and scattered a powerful light and shockwave into the surroundings, kicking up a large cloud of dust off the ground.

“Wha...!?”

At the sudden surprise attack from high above, the star mages fell to their knees. That satellite that was floating in the skies was something the Imperial Capital's Weapon Supremacy Development Department had fired in the past, and was given to Nene as a field engineer for experimental use.

—Anti-star spirit weapons.

Using a wavelength to throw the movement of star spirits out of order for two seconds, it deployed over a range of thirty metres. And in that two second time span, Iska made his move.

“Five to the right.”

Yelling that to Jhin, Iska twisted to the left. And in a single breath, he closed the distance to the star mages who had surrounded them.

“You're only a regular soldier from the Empire...! Just cause we were caught by surprise!”

Firing out an angry roar, the star mage jumped out of the hanging cloud of dust. A crimson crest floated from the man's exposed elbow.

Star crest—it was proof that one was endowed with star spirit. The portion where the crest showed up differed per individual, and the stronger the endowed star spirit, the larger and more complex the shape of the crest. That ominous birthmark was one of the reasons they were disparaged as witches and warlocks in the Empire.

“On top of that, you aren't even holding a gun? Are you sane!?”

Without replying, Iska advanced further. Using his muscles and equilibrium that were tempered to the utmost limit, he made it possible to step forward while maintaining a stance without dropping his speed at all despite carrying a sword in each hand.

“You bastard!”

In an instant, Iska closed the distance between them to the range of his swords, and the star mage put himself on guard. He was unable to escape from Iska's dash. And perhaps because he had sensed that fact, he raised his right arm with the star crest on it overhead as he prepared to intercept the attack.

—The crimson crest shined brilliantly. And around his right arm, red flickering sparks were given birth.

“Oh star spirit of the raging flame...”

“The flame lineage huh?”

“Burst!”

The sparks born above Iska condensed in a flash. They bundled into a massive fireball and came swooping down. And bathed in the flames, Iska would be brought down—that future drawn by the warlock's mind was drowned out by a witch's scream.

“It's no good! Behind—”

“...Gu...”

However, her warning was too late. The star mage collapsed in silence.

“The flame lineage of star spirits is one of the more menacing star spirits to the Empire. On top of burning through our battle armour, it could ignite the gunpowder and weapons in our armouries. However, it's weakness is that 'the scale and trajectory of the flame can be predicted by the embers born of the flame.' Before it can be fully invoked, it's fine to simply escape its trajectory.”

Iska stood behind the fallen man. Before the fire could make its impact, he positioned himself in the man's flank and violently struck him in the back of the head with the grip of his sword.

“To sense the attack before it is invoked you say... There isn't even a second to...”

“It just means I trained to do so.”

“S-Stay back!”

The witch with a green star crest on the nape of her neck—the female star mage thrust her hand forward with an angered expression.

Star spirit of wind.

Even within the star spirits that were lumped together within that category, they varied based on the strength of the spirit from a 'gentle breeze' to a 'tempest.' Furthermore, there existed various subspecies like a 'blade of wind,' so until one received an attack from that star spirit, one was unable to identify the true nature of the star spirit itself. However, to Iska, as long as he knew it was a witch of wind, that was sufficient.

“The wind brought forth by a star spirit of wind is invisible. Contrary to the star spirit of fire's power which is displayed during activation, it is difficult to react against its attacks. However...”

Iska slipped past the thrust out hand to the side. In the small opening created by the witch's blinking, Iska was stooped down at her feet.

“There is an instant before the wind is born.”

Thud...

Iska's palm took aim at the completely defenceless jaw and shot up like a blur.

“_____”

Before the gust could take shape, the witch lost her consciousness. Since the human which served as its host didn't pass down any commands, the star spirit under her control also fell silent. All that reached Iska was a gentle breeze brought on by the dregs of her power. The two who were barely able to react had fallen silent.

There were only three left, and all were made to faint by Iska's skill in an instant.

“Jhin, how's your end?”

“It's done.”

Behind him, the silver haired sniper let his rifle rest on the ground. From within the cloud of dust that Nene kicked up, all the star mages who had fallen to their knees behind Jhin had the gaps between their armour drilled and had collapsed. All that despite visibility beyond a couple metres being completely obstructed. The gaps in their armour should have been completely hidden in such poor visibility. So it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the finesse used to precisely shoot at those gaps was already beyond magic and could just be called a miracle.

“Fueeh... Just as always huh. Jhin-kun and Iska-kun.”

“It's because we were just having a staring contest with them until Nene's grenades came down. All that I needed to do was memorize where they were when the cloud of dust was kicked up and shoot. If you'd like, it wouldn't be a problem to close my eyes and do it.”

Jhin reloaded his rifle and corrected his posture while Captain Mismis simply stared at him dumbfounded.

“Eh? I mean, it's the gap between the clothing. Even though it's so thin.....”

“I'm a marksman. If I can't do that much it would be out of the question.”

It was Jhin's duty as a sniper to make use of the opening created by Nene's wide range attack which threw the enemy out of order and finish them off. The problem came when the enemy was aware of that cooperation between them.

If they targeted Nene or Jhin first, or if they concentrated fire on Captain Mismis, it would be an entirely different story. It was necessary to draw the enemy's attention with a decoy. That was Iska—his role was to assault the star spirit corps on his own, and direct all star spirit attacks that should have been aimed at the others onto himself in a reckless attack.

“If it was a year ago, we could have just left all of these guys to Iska and go on ahead of him though.”

Jhin looked down over the collapsed star spirit corps.

“A battle hating battle maniac, was it?”

“...”

Even while receiving a counter offensive from the two who had been out of range of Nene's attack, all five star mages had been knocked down and rendered unconscious by Iska. Moreover he did so without using the small arms which were essentially the symbol of the current Empire.

The incarnation of carnage, the fierce god.

Those were the nicknames bestowed on him by the star mages who witnessed the way Iska charged into battle without fear of death.

—That's why he was the battle hating battle maniac.

He desired more than anybody else for the fighting to stop. It was exactly for this reason that he stood further forward on the front line than anybody else when he fought, that he systematically restrained the star mages, that he would capture the pure bred, and that he would use it as a hostage to make the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency consent to peace talks.

“Someone has to take on the role of being hated, after all...”

The upper echelon of the Empire who envisioned total domination would likely scowl at him. The Nebulis Imperial Household Agency would also naturally treat him as a sworn enemy.

“Well, I was already told by Master to be prepared to be hated by both sides.”

Storing his black star sword in its sheathe, Iska turned around. His determination had been made since he inherited the star sword from his master.

“Uuuun... I want to take them all in, but we need to hurry to the front line right away.”

Captain Mismis looked over the star mages who were laying on the ground.

“Let's have a platoon from the strategic base carry them shall we? Nene-chan, please.”

“Roger that. Then I'll contact them 'kay? The handcuffs for restraining them should be

packed in the back of the car. But the car is kind of on fire, I wonder if we can get them out~."

Nene pointed the tip of her foot towards the burning military car. The field engineer took a single step forward. And in front of her feet, a violent rumbling assaulted on her.

"K-kya!?"

Mismis let out a small scream as she toppled over. The thunderous roar exceeded even Nene's earlier bombardment, and in a flash, the ground began to project upwards.

...An earthquake, no, something else?

...Just what was that irregular movement of the ground?

It was like something was creeping underneath the earth.

"There's no way we can allow you to take them away."

A woman's voice blurred by anger weaved its way through the trees.

"Those people are the proud comrades of Nebulis. Don't touch them, dogs of the Empire."

The ground of the forest swelled up as it rose. The vast amount of earth and stand gathered as if it had intent and took on a humanoid shape which stoop up like it was covering for the fallen star mages.

"A star spirit of earth!?"

"...A golem huh? On top of that, the speed it took shape at was fast."

Nene yelled out and Jhin leaked out a mutter.

"How peculiar. From the looks of it, it's just a regular platoon. But the star spirit corps was completely dealt with before I could come running over huh."

The earthen golem mowed down the trees as it appeared. Standing on its shoulder, was a young woman with bright brown hair tied to the left and right. She was not

wearing the uniform of a star spirit corps member from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, but an apron like that of a housekeeper, as well as a skirt that looked long enough for its hems to reach the ground. At a glance, it didn't look like clothing that was appropriate for battle, but...

“Breathe.”

In accordance with her voice, the ground shook and the sunlight that was basking down on Iska was obstructed. A second golem. The giant's fist came swinging downward towards Iska.

“I'll start with this one.”

“Iska-kun!?”

The ground caved in. Within their field of view where the roots of the Nelka trees were being torn out, the fist of the golem cracked along with the sound of a click.

“—Captain.”

The golem's fist crumbled to pieces with a dry sound. The moment the wrist of the golem was destroyed, Iska faced off against the star mage on the shoulder of the other golem with a black sword in hand.

“I'll take care of this. Take Jhin and Nene and head towards the rendezvous point. Please prioritize reinforcing the front line.”

“Eh... But...”

“She's quite the powerful star mage. Even with the four of us it will take a bit of time.”

Turning his back to the three of them, Iska crossed his star swords and took up his stance. The captain's determination came quickly afterwards.

“I-I got it. Be careful!”

Mismis dashed with all her might with small footsteps as Nene and Jhin chased after her. The star mage endowed with a star spirit of the earth didn't even look at the three of them depart.

“You're not chasing them?”

“Oh I will. After I finish taking care of you and rescue my comrades, I will take my time and do so.”

She had a cold gaze and tone. The way she glared at a soldier of the Empire, was the very image of the existence known as a witch that was ostracized and feared by the entire Empire in the past.

“The talent to be able to sever the fist of a golem. I see, that's why you thought that you would be able to hold me back on your own?”

“If it was?”

“Don't get conceited, you mere foot soldier.”

A wriggling presence came up behind him. As Iska turned around, what came into sight was a fist. It was the fist that should have been smashed to pieces just now.

“The fist was restored?”

“It's made of earth. As long as I command it to keep its shape, you'd do best to think of the golem as an immortal soldier.”

However, the reason Iska opened his eyes wide in surprise was something else entirely. The restoration was far too quick. It was practical for a portion of the giant to be restored using the intervention of a star spirit of earth. However, in reality, it wasn't something that should have been so simple and quick to accomplish.

...Such a large amount of earth was being remotely controlled to such an extent.

...The strength of the star spirit itself, as well as the skills of the star mage were not something to scoff at.

The giant's fist skimmed Iska's bangs as it passed by. In that instant, he leaped backwards to evade it. Seeing him do so, the witch's composed face distorted in irritation.

“Those movements suggest that you're quite familiar with attacks from star spirits. It couldn't be that you're a Holy Apostle... The strongest force of the Empire?”

“I'm just a simple soldier.”

With the vigour of his leap, Iska kicked the trunk of a tree and wiped off the mud that was clinging to the soles of his feet.

“I'm surprised. You changed the ground into a quagmire in a single instant like that.”

She wasn't only operating the golem's detached fist. In that instant, she even prepared a plan to seal Iska's movements by turning the earth beneath his feet into a quagmire. She was aiming to stop her enemy while striking him with the golem's fist—

Her plan was splendid, but her only miscalculation was Iska's uncommon style of martial arts. Despite having his movements constrained by the mud coiling around his feet, Iska's speed surpassed that of the golem.

“Let me ask you one thing.”

From the other side of the ground that turned into a quagmire, Iska squared off against the earth star mage.

“I don't really think it's the case, but could you be the star mage known as the Ice Witch of Calamity?”

“...Ha.”

Her reply, was a sneer.

“Believe what you will.”

The ground squirmed like a living being. Was it a third golem? Contrary to the premonition that Iska put himself on guard for, something entirely different tore through the ground and flew out.

—A spear of earth.

Dozens of sharp spears came flying out of the earth with terrifying force and shot out towards Iska.

“Fuu...”

With a single leap, Iska somersaulted up higher than the height of the golem. And with his right star sword, Iska mowed down the incoming spears of earth.

With a single swing.

With the countless number of spears raining on his path, he isolated only the ones that were on a trajectory to intercept him in an instant. And with a single slash from his black sword, he cut them down.

“...You severed a star spell!?”

Bewilderment was mixed in the witch's voice. Though the earthen spears created with star spirit looked primitive, in reality, unlike the golem made of hardened earth, those spears were made of ultra hardened masses of metal from deep underneath the ground. If he carelessly assumed that they had the same strength as the golem, Iska's body would likely have been easily pierced. And yet he cut them down with a single slash. On top of that, they weren't destroyed, but severed clean in two in such a way that it could be said to be beautiful.

“Bastard, just what is that sword?”

“—A star sword.”

It was the reason the highest authority within the Empire, the Eight Grand Apostles, had their attention drawn to the soldier known as Iska. Naturally Iska's transcendental talent as a swordsman was also of notice, but there was that pair of swords that Iska inherited from his master.

“The black star sword has the power to 'isolate the stars.' As long as the timing and position of the slash is correct, it is able to sever the intervention of any star spirit.”

“Isolate the intervention of star spirits...? Haa, do you really think I'll believe such falsehoods? If such a thing existed, it would have been mass produced by the Empire long ago.”

“It can't be made. This one's the only genuine article.”

“And a mere foot soldier wields it?”

“It wasn't supplied by the Empire. I received it from my master in swordsmanship.”

“...”

The girl looked at the star sword with an annoyed gaze. Though she found it hard to believe, she could tell he wasn't lying. She could likely tell from Iska's eyes. Moreover...

“In that case, what kind of effect does the white sword that is paired with the black one have?”

“How sharp you are.”

Hearing the star mage's insight, Iska honestly praised her.

“I don't have any intent of telling you. Aah, but it's a different story if it's a bargaining chip. I don't mind telling you if you tell me the location of the star mage known as the Ice Witch of Calamity.”

“...Silence you damn foot soldier!”

One of the girl's eyebrows twitched upwards as her small mouth opened widely with a roar.

“A bastard like you will not be permitted to even look upon her figure!”

“Thought so.”

Flicking the earth stuck to his sword off, Iska dashed towards the star mage.

“However, I have business with the Ice Witch of Calamity.”

“...Don't screw with me!”



The girl's composure had collapsed.

“Just how long can you endure using only a sword!?”

The body of the second golem broke into a countless number of pieces. Furthermore, that crumbled earth condensed in the air, and became spears of earth just like before and hung over Iska's head. Without even looking at them, Iska repelled them with his black sword. He didn't cut them. He chose to deflect them back towards the star mage herself.

“Impossible!?”

The girl known as a witch leaped off the golem's shoulder. While her attention was caught by the earthen spear grazing her cheek, Iska reduced the distance between the two of them.

“Too slow.”

As the girl turned around, a sword was thrust out at her neck.

“...! What the hell are you?”

The girl's face was dyed red in humiliation and shock as she bit down on her lip. She was slightly shorter than Iska. Even more so than when he looked at her from a distance, the girl who appeared to be a servant looked to be dainty and slender.

Was she about the same age as him? That thought suddenly passed through his mind. And then shaking off such idle thoughts, Iska spoke up.

“I'll have you tell me about the location of your comrade.”

“What will you do if I don't?”

The witch snickered as she made a smile.

“Kill me.”

“...Kill you?”

As she poured on such words that were outside his expectations, Iska unintentionally

repeated after her.

“Just kill me. We star mages are completely different from you damn dogs of the Empire. Rather than being a hostage, we are prepared to chose death.”

“Ah... Um, no...”

“Feel free to try and force me, torture me or imprison me.”

His calculations had gone completely out of order. That was Iska's honest mental state. Iska's only objective was the Ice Witch of Calamity. Even if he randomly captured a different witch, it would likely only put the Ice Witch of Calamity further on guard.

“What's the matter? Kill me!”

“—”

He was unsure on how he should proceed. Should he restrain her here? Or should he render her unconscious and leave her for another squad to take care of? And in the instant that Iska's focus drifted away from her...

“You've got guts to let your attention wander in front of any enemy... You're full of openings!”

The girl tore off her skirt. No. From the very beginning, it could be assumed that her outfit was some sort of battle attire with a special purpose.

“Using cloth as a smoke screen!?”

“Did you think that I would be to frightened to move if you threatened me with a sword?”

The torn skirt was aimed at Iska's sword and entwined it while the remaining cloth was used to seal his vision.

“I am Alice-sama's attendant and guard. I'm already well acquainted to battles at this range.”

Having torn away the excess cloth, the girl was now wearing a miniskirt. In her hand, she was grasping a folding ceremonial short dagger. Below that extra long skirt that

seemed unsuitable for combat, she had a belt around her thigh where it was hidden.

“Begone!”

She slashed out with her dagger in hand. The sharp dagger cut through the cloth towards the young man—

And then...

“...!?”

The attendant was now lying face down against the hard earth and was pinned down.

“Impo... ssible!?”

“I was caught off guard. You wrapped the blades of my swords up with the fibre from your skirt, and furthermore you sealed my vision and counterattacked with a hidden weapon huh. To think there were soldiers among the star mages who learned such assassination techniques.”

She couldn't understand how she ended up being pinned down. While applying pressure on the astonished girl's shoulder joint, Iska suddenly let out his breathe.

“To think a star mage would use a weapon.”

“...I led you to believe such a thing and pulled off a surprise attack without a hitch, just what the hell are you to pin me down despite that?”

The young witch ground her molars.

“Let me change my question. You just said you were Alice-sama's attendant. Who is Alice?”

“...!”

The girl's expression changed.

“Could that be the Ice Witch of—”

“That would be my name.”

It was not the voice of the girl beneath him. Then just who was it? And as Iska turned around to the voice that rang out from behind him...

Something that he had never experienced before happened. A chill ran down his spine to such an extent that he could make such a statement, and Iska discarded all other thoughts as he leaped into the air.

“I shall let you know. Taste it with your body.”

—The Grand Calamity of Ice—

With a snap, the atmosphere, the trees, the ground, everything within sight was enveloped in a white mist as if it was an illusion. Iska's kinetic vision was seized for an instant, and after that spectacle, the entire 'world' before his eyes was shut in a ghastly pale shine of freezing ice.

“Ow!?”

An intense cold wave ran up his neck and arm. Ice and snow mixed in with the wind, and in an instant his hand and feet were assaulted by an intense shiver.

...Despite leaping into the air, I can still feel such an intense cold?

...Just how cold is it on the ground!?

The sound of footsteps on ice resounded in the air. Standing atop a hill of ice in the sea of trees, was young woman in royal garments. A luxurious headdress was concealing her face, and her voice was surprisingly young.

“Rin, are you injured?”

“Alice-sama!”

The witch in servant's clothing looked up at the girl named Alice. She had a cheerful and bright expression and voice that seemed like a completely different person from the time she faced off against Iska. She likely wouldn't show such a reaction if reinforcements had simply arrived.

—Absolute faith and reverence.

—No matter the crisis, no matter how hopeless the situation, if this woman was there, it could be overcome. She was making that kind of expression.

Iska then landed on the ice.

“...You're kidding right?”

Iska's long sigh turned to white mist in a flash. All the ground within sight was covered in snow and ice. Even the trees and thickets in the surrounding, everything within his field of vision had uniformly turned to ice.

It was just like the return of the ice age. In addition to that, it all happened while Iska was evading in midair. Just how much cold air had to be released to accomplish such a feat?

...If I didn't immediately leap at that time.

...I would also be sealed in a block of ice without being able to resist at all.

“Alice-sama, please be careful. I do not understand how it works, but the sword that man wields seems to be able to cut down and isolate star spells.”

“Thank you, Rin. However, that is only a trivial matter is it not?”

“Eh?”

“If my strike just now would have connected, that sword or anything else would have been irrelevant. I'm surprised you evaded it.”

Gently brushing the head of the girl called Rin, the new witch turned her attention towards Iska.

—Royal garments covered in beautiful ornaments.

—The veil which concealed her face was also gorgeous.

In a different sense from the girl called Rin, her appearance was unsuitable for the battlefield. Her outfit stood out like a sore thumb, and this even applied to the headdress which she went out of the way to use to hide her face. It was like she was plainly confessing that she was someone important in the Nebulis Imperial Household

Agency.

“However, Rin, the results are the best we could ask for. Good work buying me time.”

“Time?”

“Now I wonder just what that is behind me?”

The girl in royal garments pointed out to her rear. And behind her, beyond the frozen scenery of the sea of trees...

“...The power reactor!?”

What came into Iska's vision, was the power reactor, frozen in an enormous block of ice. Despite being far enough away from it that it was somewhat blurry, he could clearly identify it by sight. That unrefined and imposing weapon power reactor was reborn as a crystal like icicle and was shining under the sunlight. And then...

“Crumble.”

Along with the single word from the girl in royal garments, as if it warped from being trampled on, the icicle deformed and was smashed to bits along with the roar of it crumbling apart.

“...So this was your aim from the very beginning?”

Iska bit down on his teeth. Mismis, Jhin and Nene were headed to the front line where they were engaged in battle with a star spirit corps. The space Iska was standing in was the halfway point to reinforcing that line. However, the enemy's goal as a direct attack on the base itself.

“Are you saying you assaulted the Imperial strategic base all on your own?”

“Is there a problem with that?”

Her royal garments did not have a single blemish on them let alone even a hint of dirt. There should have been a defensive unit remaining in the Imperial base. If a witch appeared there, it wouldn't be weird for them to surround and shower her in a rain of bullets. But even so...

“Aah, there is a problem. You're it.”

As she spoke through the veil, Iska could feel a gaze filled with cold hostility.

“In truth I was planning on capturing a dozen or so prisoners at that base. But now we're unable to analyze the newest weapons of the Empire. If I didn't fall back immediately, Rin would have been taken prisoner after all.”

“—”

“Now just what are you I wonder? For someone who is not even a Holy Apostle to overwhelm Rin...”

In response to the star mage's question, the answer Iska chose, was a reply that could be considered a declaration of war.



“I came here, in order to capture you.”

“Capture me? Just who are you saying that to I wonder? If you do not wish to taste the pain of ice and snow far more terrifying than death, then it is you who should—”

““Surrender.””

In that shining white world, the young man wielding a pair of swords and the young woman in royal garments both made that declaration.

“...Swordsman of the Empire, shall I hear your name?”

“Iska.”

While gripping both his swords, Iska honestly replied. There was the possibility that she may know his identity as a former Holy Apostle from previous combat data, but to Iska, that was nothing for him to be concerned about.

“And you?”

“Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. You already realized have you not? The star mage that the Empire calls the 'Ice Witch of Calamity,' is none other than myself.”

The girl stood atop a hill of ice. Her headdress was hiding her face. But the voice which rang through the sea of trees was dignified and transparent, and was filled with a sense of purity and integrity that gave her the air of a noble maiden.

“So you cornered Nebulis' star spirit corps all on your own?”

“So you're saying you destroyed the Empire's weapon power reactor all on your own?”

And then, the two of them spoke out at the same time.

“...That's right.”

A small distance away from where Iska was standing as he nodded, were two star mages who were sound asleep.

“What are you? Just how could a soldier who is not part of the 'Holy Apostles' unit under the direct supervision of the Emperor, let alone even being a commanding

officer, overwhelm Nebulis' star spirit corps I wonder?"

"That's what I would like to say. On top of getting all the way to the Empire's base on your own, you broke through the defences and destroyed the power reactor... It is not something the average star mage can do."

The sea of trees was frozen over by snow and ice giving off a cold that made one think of the ice age. Far to the rear, was the weapon power reactor which was smashed to pieces. The steel armour was unable to withstand the pressure from the extremely low temperatures approaching absolute zero and crumbled to pieces.

...This was the Ice Witch of Calamity.

...Certainly, that may have been the first time that I ever saw a star spell on such a scale.

She was in a different dimension from other star mages. Even if one prepared ten star mages who used the same system of ice, they would probably be unable to create cold air at such a scale.

However, that was exactly why Iska was convinced. If the Ice Witch of Calamity was endowed with such a powerful star spirit, then she was without a doubt part of the Nebulis bloodline. She was without a doubt someone very close in lineage to the current Queen Nebulis.

""Just what are you?""

The mechanized Utopia, the Empire's thoroughly tempered trump card—the Successor of Black Steel, Iska.

The witch's paradise, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency's most prominent witch—the Ice Witch of Calamity, Alice.

The two of them made their move at the same time.

"Oh wall, crush him!"

Along with Alice's words, a fissure formed in the ice at Iska's feet. The ice tore off the ground and formed walls all around Iska and then closed in on him seemingly with the intent to crush him.

“...Completely surrounded huh.”

They were far too large to cut with a sword. Making that decision, Iska ran towards the wall that was closing in on him the fastest.

“He leaped towards the ice wall on his own!?”

While Alice's attendant Rin opened her eyes wide in surprise, Iska stooped down into a sliding pose and glided on the ice.

—The gap between the ice walls.

Before the four ice walls could completely seal him in...

“That's what I thought. If you can overwhelm Rin, then you should at least be able to do that much.”

Beneath the veil hiding her face, the Ice Witch of Calamity let out a fearless smile.

“Calamity of Ice, the Thousand Thorns of the Blizzard.”

“A sword of ice?”

Did she create a gap that was easy to slip through on purpose to guide him there? Iska came upon that realization as hundreds of shining swords appeared in the direction he was gliding towards. From the ice. From the atmosphere. From the trunks of the frozen trees. Swords of ice continued to appear one after the other. When Iska evaded Rin's spears of earth, he did so by evading into the sky. However, the swords of ice were positioned in every direction possible. There was nowhere to escape to.

“A thousand swords in every possible direction, if you can escape it, go ahead and show me.”

The star mage raised her hand overhead.

“Pierce him.”

From overhead, from the sides, from below, the swords of ice poured down at Iska like a sudden shower. Evading or defending was impossible. Then just what should he do?

—Without any useless pondering, he broke straight through the front.

With both star swords at the ready, Iska ran across the ice.

“HAA!”

Grasping the black star sword tightly, he mowed down the blades flying in at his flank. He then immediately began spinning his body like a spinning top. While sensing the swords coming in from below piercing through the cuffs of his battle uniform, he slipped through the paper thin gaps.

He drove further forward. With a single flick of the sword in his left hand, he repelled the blades coming in from the sky. The repelled blades crossed other swords in the air and intercepted them. And even in that interval, he mowed down the swords at the edge of his peripheral vision with the sword in his right hand. As for the swords coming in from directly behind him, he knocked them down using only the sensation against his skin.

“—Above!”

Swords were being created in the air in his blind spots, and Iska was using his senses to deal with them. There wasn't even a whole second before he had to intercept them. He wouldn't even look behind him as he did so. The flow of the air was slightly disturbed by the formation of the swords of ice. He could also react to the cold given off by the swords of ice in an instant.

“...How dreadful.”

The one to speak with a half astonished expression, was none other than the Ice Witch of Calamity, Alice.

“But it's still no good. Star spirits are the very will of the stars. There's no way an Imperial soldier who rejects them could strike back at me or my star spirit.”

Iska hadn't even knocked down a hundred glacial blades yet. Just knocking them down was his limit. Forget even reaching the hill which Alice stood atop, he was being pushed backwards.

“Guu...”

A single strike, a blade that Iska failed to repel cut his right arm. His concentration was disturbed for an instant from the pain, and in that gap, his left thigh, side, shoulder, every possible part of him was being grazed by blades.

“So that's your limit.”

“No.”

The white steel sword Iska gripped in his hand was filled with light. The attendant called Rin was shown the black star sword which could isolate the power of any star spirit. As for the other that formed a pair with it—

“Awaken.”

A sword of ice. In the empty space directly above Iska, a weapon exactly identical to the ones created by the Ice Witch of Calamity using star spirit was born.

“The same star spell as Alice-sama!? You bastard... Just what is that power!?”

“It isn't me. It's an ability of this star sword.”

The ability endowed within the white star sword was 'unleashing the star.'

—The black star sword could cut any star spell apart.

— The white star sword could 'replicate' the star spells the black star sword had cut down a single time.

An azure light shined down on Iska.

It wasn't something that Alice was producing. Iska's black star sword had isolated it, and his white star sword replicated the spell.

“Ninety seven. Those spells that were isolated by the black star sword, are released by the white star sword.”

“And just what can you do with that number? At that level you are far away from counterbalancing my star spell.”

“Counterbalance? You're missing the point. This is...”

Wiping the cut on his cheek with the back of his hand, Iska stabbed the white star sword into the ground.

“For the sake of reaching you.”

Ninety seven swords of ice. Those swords which were identical to the ones Alice created intercepted the swords that were pouring down aimed at Iska.

—And at the same time, Iska ran.

A world of ice.

And in the centre of that, he made a straight line towards the Ice Witch of Calamity. The swords of ice that Iska shot out could not counter balance Alice's star spell, but for a few seconds, it could buy time for Iska to sprint at his full speed.

“Alice-sama!”

As Rin figured out Iska's aim, she reflexively called out her master's name. Iska ran up the hill of ice and snow. Before the terrifying acceleration of his dash, Alice, who had been perfectly composed the entire time, put herself on guard for the first time.

“A good plan... Is what I would like to say, but it's useless.”

She thrust forward her right arm and snapped her fingers. And with a snap, an extremely beautiful mirror shield appeared at her feet.

“Flower of Ice.”

The sound of cutting into something solid rang through the sea of trees.

“It's hard!?”

Holding his sword in a downward swing, Iska unintentionally twisted his expression. The large flower of ice before Alice caught his star sword. It caught that black steel blade that could isolate any star spell.

“It's an invincible shield. It can even suppress the large scaled Imperial weapons of destruction.”

“...Both your offence and defence are almighty huh.”

“Yes. That's why, it's about time you give up!”

The cold air fired out of the enormous flower of ice blew away Iska into the air. Calculating the trajectory he would fall at, Alice put a countless number of swords of ice into place. However—there was a reason the Eight Grand Apostles entrusted the only pair of star swords in the world to Iska. And Alice was still making light of that fact. Of the 'tenacity' of the young man given the name of the Successor of Black Steel.

“...Give... up... you say?”

Although he was blown away, Iska muttered while biting down on his teeth.

“If I give up here, who will end this war!?”

“—Eh?”

While Alice and Rin had their attention caught by him for an instant, Iska stabbed both his star swords into the large tree in front of him. The two swords pierced deeply into the frozen tree trunk. Landing on the trunk with both his feet, Iska leaped over to the next tree at high speed. And in the moment that Alice lost sight of Iska's figure due to his superhuman movement speed, Iska leaped over the invincible flower of ice shield and landed behind Alice.

“Wha!?”

The Ice Witch of Calamity. The girl feared by that name screamed in shock as she turned around.

“Oh vines, restrain him!” As Iska held his sword aloft, vines made of ice twined around his ankles. They were vines that extended out of the ice that Iska landed on.

“How persistent...! Just surrender or collapse already!”

“That's my line!”

Before the vines of ice could twine around his entire body, Iska severed the vines. And while he did so, the star mage ascended further up the hill of ice and snow and increased the distance between her and Iska.

“...Alice-sama pulled back?”

Rin watched that scene like she couldn't believe what was happening. While Iska was cutting the vines of ice, there should have been a countless number of methods to attack him. However, Alice threw away that opportunity she created and chose to distance herself from him.

—She feared it.

—She feared his counterattack.

A halfhearted attack wouldn't work on this swordsman. Using those inhuman movements he could dodge an attack and use that gap to strike at her throat. That was exactly why she chose to step back.

“How absurd.”

That sigh accompanied by a white mist came from the mouth below the veil.

“Absurd?”

“I'm talking about you.”

Alice looked down on Iska from atop the hill of snow and ice.

“Every time I think I had attained victory you would persistently endure and pursue me like a beast... That's why I'm saying it's absurd. Despite demeaning us as witches and warlocks, aren't you a far more inhuman beast than us?”

“...Look who's talking.”

Iska replied while wiping the sweat off his brow. A cold that could freeze over an entire forest, and the countless swords of ice that could wipe out an entire Imperial battalion. While possessing enough destructive power to demolish a single city with ease, she also possessed an invincible shield which could even repel Iska's attacks.

“You're the same aren't you?”

“I shall take that as a compliment. However, I have no intention of standing down. I shall defeat you Imperials and won't allow anyone get in the way of my ambition in

unifying the world.”

“...Unifying the world?”

“A world of perpetual peace with no aggression or persecution. I wonder if you can comprehend that?”

Perhaps because Iska's reaction was outside her expectation, the girl then thrust out her chest in pride as if she thought it was not all that bad.

“That's right. This is exactly what gives me the authority to succeed the royal throne of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, Aliceliese—wha, KYAAAAAAAAAAH!?”

The moment she thrust out her chest and stepped forward, her foot bumped into a mound in the ice, and the witch let out a scream as she tumbled over.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!?”

“Uwah!?”

The star mage slid down the hill of ice as she fell over. As for Iska...

“...Owowow.”

“A-are you okay?”

He reflexively caught the girl who slipped down the hill of ice.

“Y-yes, thank you... I mean, wh-wh-wh-what are you doing!?”

“...Just, instinct?”

It was a conditioned reflex. Iska couldn't continue speaking. This was because he was carrying the Ice Witch of Calamity, and the headdress that was hiding her face had fallen off from the impact of the crash.



“—Eh?”

Perhaps because she realized this, Alice touched her face with her hand. Her face had been exposed. And it was a face that was filled with a fantastical beauty. With well arranged features, she had a dignified expression. She had long, glossy eyelashes and pale red lips. Even a princess drawn in a fairy tale would be overshadowed by this girl. It was that kind of sweet and charming face.

“...”

In that frozen world, it was like time had completely stopped as they looked at each other—

“Y-you saw!?”

The first to come back to her senses was the star mage. Brushing away Iska's hand and drawing back, she thrust her hand out as she put on a threatening expression.

“My face can't be known by the Empire! I can't hold back anymore.”

The star mage ground her teeth as she scowled at him.

“We will finish this here—”

“Iska-nii!”

And at that time, a friend's voice rang out in the distance.

“Nene!?”

“Iska-kun! Wh-what's with all this ice!?”

Following after that, was Captain Mismis' voice.

“Could it be that the Ice Witch of Calamity is nearby!? Jhin-kun, Nene-chan, be careful. We don't know there the enemy may be lurkiiiiiiiiing!?”

“If you run on the ice you'll slip, rather, this captain would slip even without that...”

Jhin's voice came out with an exasperated tone, followed by footsteps. Due to the sea

of frozen trees, they couldn't yet be seen, but Iska's squad would soon be back. He could tell by their presence.

“...Rin, we're retreating.”

“B-but Alice-sama!? What about dealing with this man!?”

“We destroyed the power reactor. It would be dangerous to remain despite knowing that enemy reinforcements are coming.”

The two witches ran down the hill of ice and snow. Rin's golem made out of earth carried the other star mages, and the two of them leaped onto a strange looking bird hanging above the sea of trees.

“You said you were Iska right?”

While her face was dyed red at the failure of having her face that should have stayed hidden from anyone in the Empire revealed, the princess of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency turned her head over her shoulder.

“I shall specially let you go just this once! Don't think that you'll get another chance!”

The flapping of the bird's wings echoed through the trees, and the strange bird vanished into the sky along with the star mages.

“Iska-kuuuuuuuun, thank goodness you're alright!?”

“Waa, Captain?”

The childish captain jumped at Iska the moment he came into sight.

“I was worried. Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“...I feel like there's something wrong with jumping at someone that you think might be injured.”

On the other hand, Nene and Jhin were looking up at the hill of snow and ice as they sighed.

“What's this? Hey Jhin-nii-chan, is this really a star spell?”

“It seems that she's a star mage far out of the norm just as the rumours indicated. It's like the whole area is back in the ice age. The ice even went as far as the vicinity of the front line where we joined with the other troops.”

“...It's just as you see.”

Looking at the frozen sea of trees, Iska shrugged his shoulders.

“How exactly were you fighting? For someone like you to get injured against a star mage... I'll disinfect your wounds.”

“Th-that's right Iska-kun. If you don't get treatment it'll get infected.”

“Please.”

Thump, thump. As Iska felt his heart pounding, he returned a nod.

...Just what is this pounding?

...Is it the tension from combat? Even though it had never happened before?

Was it really just the lingering sensation of the tension from combat? Or was it something else entirely? Iska simply did not understand in the end—

Chapter 2

The Person He, and She, Met is-

1

In the fortified domain of the 'Heaven's Empire'—

Commonly referred to as the Empire, its capital city Yunmerungen boasts of the largest population in a single city anywhere in the world, and is divided into three large sectors.

Sector One is where the governmental and research institutions are located. The main parliament building of the Eight Grand Apostles who have full authority over all political matters in the country is located there. It is the sector where everything in the Empire is decided.

Sector Two is the residential area. It is where seventy percent of the Imperial Capital's population lived and a world-leading shopping district spread out next to the housing area. Every day, many tourists from the bordering 'Neutral City' would visit this sector.

And then Sector Three is the military base. It contains the manufacturing plants for the weapons developed by the research institutions from Sector One as well as the vast testing grounds to test them. It also housed the barracks for the Imperial soldiers.

“I've missed sleeping in this room...”

In the deepest corner of Imperial Barrack 03's first floor, Iska was lying down on the floor since the middle of the day looking up at the ceiling of the private room he had been living in since he was twelve years old. Perhaps because of the effect of spending so much time camping outdoors as a soldier, he found it easier to sleep on the hard floor than a soft bed.

“...But I can't sleep at all.”

He was drowsy, but in contrast to his fatigued body, his mind was racing. It had been

two days since his return from the Nelka forest. It should have been the brief moment for resting he had between missions, but even so, he couldn't get any sleep.

'The star mage that the Empire calls the 'Ice Witch of Calamity,' is none other than myself.'

The only reason that came to mind for this — was the Ice Witch of Calamity, Aliceliese. Each and every one of her star spells were comparable to a calamity. Compounded with the fact that she overran an Imperial base all on her own, Iska was left in full agreement with the Eight Grand Apostles' precautions towards her.

“...Is that why?”

He was unable to wipe her face that was revealed when her veil came off from his mind. She was a star mage with strength suitable of one called the trump card of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. On top of that she had a figure with fantastical charm. Her age also seemed to be just around Iska's own age.

“No good, no good, I need to think of something else!”

Idle thoughts would dull his mind. The orders for his next mission would surely come before long. So that he could concentrate on that, he had to rest his body.

“Iska-kun, are you there?”

A ringtone. And the same time time, he could hear a childish voice from the other side of the door.

“Captain Mismis?”

As he called back out to the voice, he opened the door. And just as he expected, the child-faced female captain with a small build was standing right there.

“I was just wondering how Iska-kun was doing... You see, you've been locked up in your room all this time right? You haven't left at all so Nene-chan was worried you know?”

“I'm alright. I'm just having a hard time falling asleep is all.”

“But you know Iska-kun, you've been making an expression like you've been worried

about something ever since we came back. Weren't you staring at the wall compleeeetely zoned out?"

Mismis looked at him with a worried expression and upturned eyes.

"Um, let's see. I... I don't usually do things fitting of a Captain, so at the very least I want my subordinates to be able to consult me. If you talk about it, it'll put you at ease too I think."

"You came all the way here for that?"

Iska looked down at the rare sight of Mismis in plain clothes. She was wearing a shirt with a cute kitten print on it and a childish frilly skirt. It was very casual clothing, but that was likely because that day was supposed to be her precious day off. And despite that, she came to visit him.

...Seriously.

...I'm no match for her.

Her talent as a soldier was definitely not great. Her results to qualify for an officer's position were also just at the cutoff point. But the reason that Iska and the others valued her highly as a captain was because of her delicate consideration for others. They wanted to follow a captain like that. She had that sort of charm to her.

"See? As I thought. Iska-kun, you're making a somewhat complicated expression just like I thought you were!"

"Am I?"

"You are! You are! Now tell your big sister about everything! But, well, I don't think it could be about anything other than the mission in the Nelka forest though."

The female captain was now looking up at him while squinting intensely.

"Did something happen?"

"...I can't get that fight out of my head."

"With the Ice Witch of Calamity? The fight ended in a draw right?"

“...I've been lost in thought about it.”

He didn't know which between them had superiority in that battle. It was clear that in a simple contest of power, neither of them was able to bring the other down, and it appeared they had a similar tactical approach in creating an opening in their opponent's defences. It had the same sensation of the psychological warfare one could witness atop a first class chess board.

Even when Iska thought that he had the advantage, he was anxious that the opening in of itself was a trap created by his opponent. It was the first time that Iska had to deal with a star mage like that. However. Was that really the cause of his insomnia?

“A-also—”

“Also?”

“...No. It's nothing.”

Iska forcibly swallowed down the words he was about to speak. 'The Ice Witch of Calamity is an extremely beautiful woman.'

...As one would expect, that couldn't be the reason for my insomnia... Or it shouldn't be.

...It would also be embarrassing for Captain Mismis to look at me strangely if I said such a thing.

“Iska-kun. That, just might be a little bit of an emotional trauma.”

“A trauma?”

“Un. After experiencing a difficult battle, the pain from your wounds or something like the fear of the battle could end up wounding your heart. Even within the Imperial forces there are quite a few people who experience it. Since you fought that Ice Witch of Calamity, it wouldn't be strange for you to become that way too...”

It was possible that he wouldn't win. It was his first encounter with a formidable enemy who made him think that. It may have been a battle which planted fear in his heart. Looking at it objectively, Mismis' analysis was certainly valid. But was that really it? Was that really the reason? It frustrated Iska that he was unable to identify the source of the emotions buried in his heart.

“Hmmm. But how can we resolve this I wonder? If the symptoms are bad then we could consult a doctor or something.”

The petite captain folded her arms with a troubled expression.

“In my case, even when I have problems, if I have some barbecue and sleep soundly, I'll get my spirits back huh~. Want to get barbecue?”

“No, I don't think it's that kind of...”

“Right~. I think it'll get better naturally with time, but I also think it would still be good to have a change of pace... Aah, that's right! Iska-kun, come here, come here!”

Standing in the doorway, Mismis suddenly turned around and started trotting away.

“I have something nice to give to Iska-kun. Follow me.”

Within Imperial Barrack 01, Iska was staring with a blank expression at a door with an adorable bunny sticker pasted on it.

“This is your room right?”

“Yup, yup. It's my room, it's a little messy but come on in.”

There were stuffed animals sprawled across the warm coloured carpet set down in the living room and the cup sitting atop the table also had a childish image of a puppy printed on it.

“Your animal collection has grown again huh?”

“Eheheeh. What'cha think? Aren't they cute?”

“Yeah. Um..... But, how do I put it, that...”

Suspended from the ceiling, displayed magnificently in the dead centre of the room, was the spectacle of hanging laundry, and Iska evasively averted his eyes.

“It's poison for the eyes.”

“Eh? What's poison for—N-N000000000000000000000000000000!?”

The woman at a marriageable age had completely forgotten about her underwear drying out in her room, and in a panic, she attempted to seal Iska's vision by raising her hands overhead.

“Y-you're wrong Iska-kun! That's not it. This was just a little bit of curiosity! Even all my friends have been getting boyfriends, so I tried pushing myself a bit. Having underwear with a somewhat adult design to take on a challenge is part of a being a woman. Don't misunderstand!”

“I don't get what you're saying at all.”

“...Ehem. Anyways.”

Mismis quickly put away the underwear that had been left out to dry.

“Let's get back to what we were talking about before okay? I feel like it's no good to just hole up in your room all day. I think you should boldly go out and have fun. So in that case, tadaaah!”

Mismis grabbed a small ticket that was on the table and raised it high overhead.

“Here, go watch this and pep up.”

“...An opera ticket? 'The Female Knight Beatrix's Blighted Love?'”

“Yup. It's a performance they put on in the Neutral City every year. I really like this opera so I've bought a book for ten tickets and watched it nine times. But I was just thinking that maybe it's enough this year. So I'll give it to Iska-kun.”

“Eh? But just when—”

“Before the next mission should be fine. In that case isn't it fine to just go tomorrow?”

The female captain thrust out her chest full of pride and self confidence.

“It's a wonderful opera. I think it'll be a good change of pace for you. This is an order from your captain.”

“...An order huh?”

Staring at the ticket he received, Iska returned a single nod.



White steam.

Milky white hot water poured out of the mouth of a faucet modelled after a lion's head into a bathtub to the point where it was overflowing, and floating atop the water's surface were flowers and herbs of every colour.

The large bathtub with steam coming out of it could be said to fit about twenty people inside. Beside it, a chilly cold bath had been prepared, and deeper within there was a sauna installed that was filled with piping hot steam.

...*Drip*.

Advancing along the wet tiles on the floor was a young woman wearing attendant's clothing.

“Alice-sama, so you were still soaking in?”

The Nebulis Royal Palace.

In response to the dignified voice that resounded through the bath, Alice opened her shut eyelids and lifted her face out of the water.

“How about coming out now? It is well past the time to retire for the night.”

“...I'm not tired.”

“You had told me the same thing last night. Even though, normally, when you return from a battle you do not even have a meal and go straight to sleep.”

“But you know, I'm not tired at all~.”

While blowing out bubbles, she sank back underneath the surface of the water. It was about what happened at the Nelka forest. She departed together with Rin to destroy the Imperial weapon power reactor at her mother's command. The mission itself was executed perfectly. There wasn't a single blunder.

...But even so, what was it?

...Why am I unable to get that swordsman out of my mind? I am well aware that is one of the reasons I can't sleep sleep.

"Is it about that soldier who named himself Iska?"

Standing at the edge of the bathtub barefoot, Rin was wearing her housekeeping outfit just as usual.

"I've been wondering about that swordsman's background even before we came back to the Imperial Household Agency you see."

"...I wonder just who he is?"

He was a young man just about her age. She could see from his appearance and conduct that he was brimming with youthfulness, but when it came time for combat he could only be described as ferocious.

With his terrifying concentration and inhuman physical ability, he was able to close in on Alice while dealing with her attacks. When she fought against the Holy Apostles, she felt that they were formidable enemies. However, it was the first time that she felt a sense of dread that something could snap at her neck at any time.

"I shall begin an investigation into that swordsman's background. However, at best, it will still take a few days."

"That's more than enough. Thank you, Rin."

While staring vacantly at the petals floating atop the water, she nodded—

"That sword."

...There was no way. The swords only looked alike.

...My benefactor couldn't possibly be part of the Empire of all things.

"That's it, it's just a coincidence."

"Eh?"

“I-it's nothing!”

The muttering overflowing from her heart that she unconsciously let out was picked up by Rin, and Alice waved her hands in a panic.

'Are you hurt? To think an Imperial weapon would go berserk this close to the Neutral City... '

'But it's alright, I cut off the driving force of the mobility unit. This guy can't move anymore.'

A memory coloured in sand.

A shower of sparks, and a dense cloud of sand hanging overhead.

A swordsman who saved her from an Imperial weapon that had gone out of control and attacked her. Because of the cloud of sand, both his figure and voice were hazy. But even so, she remembered the glimmer he held in each of his hands. Black and white steel. Those shining blades which were like antipodes of each other were just like the swords that young swordsman was wielding.

“...”

Within the bathtub, Alice pushed down on her chest with her hand. What was passed through her precocious — as Rin would enviously describe it — her womanly and well developed chest, was her heart, beating at a rate faster than she could believe.

Thump, thump, thump.

Rather than showing any signs of calming down, even now it only felt like it was getting stronger.

“Aaaah geez! This is no good! I need a change of pace!”

“Wait a minute Alice-sama, the water!? Goodness... Please do not stand up with such vigour. Look, even my clothes have gotten wet.”

“Yes! A change of pace! Rin, now that it's settled, make preparations for tomorrow!”

“...My clothes...”

Urging on Rin who was puffing out her cheeks, Alice quickly proceeded to the dressing room. Along one of the walls was a mirror which she rushed over to as she stretched out her hand towards an accessory case.

“Yes, this one will do.”

“Alice-sama, please do not walk around before drying your body. You'll slip and fall.”

“I won't fall. I'm not a child.”

“I'm saying it because you are running around like a child. Come on, if you do not dry yourself off you will catch a cold.”

Rin took a towel with both her hands and carefully dried out Alice's dripping blonde hair.

“Hey Rin, look at this, look.”

“‘The Female Knight Beatrix's Blighted Love'...? My goodness, did you make reservations for an opera while keeping it a secret from me again?”

After drying off her hair, Rin moved down towards Alice's neck and back. The attendant wiped off the drops of water that were falling down from the nape of her neck and down her back. Rin was born to a bloodline that had served as caretakers for the Nebulis royal family for generations. While being one year younger than Alice, she had the duty to take care of her. To Alice, she was the only good friend that she could freely joke around with.

“It was quite hard to get these tickets you know? To guarantee I got paired seats I had to enter a draw for them four times.”

“...Understood. I shall accompany you.”

After wiping off Alice's body, Rin let out a grandiose sigh.

“But is this really alright? Even though you've just had your face seen by that swordsman?”

The Imperial swordsman who named himself Iska. During the battle with him, her headdress had fallen off, and the face that she had been hiding was revealed. If the

Empire knew her face, it was possible that they would dispatch assassins after her. For a time, Alice had also panicked at that possibility, but...

"It's fine. Thinking about it properly, there's no problem in him having seen my face."

In contrast to the Empire who treated star spirits as something wicked, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency who embraced them had researched those spirits much more in depth.

And one of those details, was the individual differences between star spirits.

Though the star spirits dwelling within humans were wide and varied, Alice's star spirit had a particularly strong sense of danger. When danger befell her, it would automatically take action to defend her. Since she had a star spirit that was capable of warding off an attack from a large scale Imperial weapon of destruction, there was no real need to fear one or two assassins.

"I'm not scared of any Imperial assassins. I have my star spirit, and most of all Rin is with me too."

"...What a convenient compliment."

"It's true. Besides, every time I went to the Neutral City, I wasn't wearing my headdress right? Let's just go out boldly in our usual outfits."

Alice waved around the tickets in her hand as she spoke.

"The curtains rise just before noon, so I want to leave the royal palace by sunrise."

"In that case, I shall prepare the sand bird. Since we will be leaving first thing in the morning, please return to your room and retire for the night. I will hold on to the tickets."

"Aah, wait a sec, Rin!?"

"It is so that Alice-sama does not lose them. Moreover, please put on your underwear already. Are you trying to boast to me by showing off like that?"

"I-I'm not boasting!?"

After Rin stared enviously at Alice's chest as it swayed around with vigour, Alice turned around in a panic.

“Also, please inform the Queen of your plans. Just recently there was quite the uproar when you left without permission after all.”

“...What a pain.”

“Your reply.”

“...Okaaaaay.”

In response to her attendant's strict tone, Alice let out a small sigh.

Two years ago—

His assigned platoon had been determined. On the day after that report, his master vanished from before his eyes. No, it was more correct to say his master boldly took his leave right in front of him.

“It was just you and Jhin huh? The ones who couldn't run away from me.”

Upon his departure, he left those cynical words behind.

“But, well, I guess it's better that you two are left.”

The Empire's strongest swordsman, Crosswell Ness Livergate—also known as the 'Man of Black Steel.'

After serving as the head of the Holy Apostles in the Imperial Capital, he scouted out boys and girls from all over the Empire and tempered them in hopes of finding a successor. No, it would be more correct to describe it as screening them. After only half a day of training, about half of them dropped out. By the time the day ended, ninety percent of them dropped out. Three days later, half of the remaining members dropped out. And as one, then three, then five years passed, the only ones left were Jhin and Iska.

“Iska, you were the last of the candidates that I chose and brought along. Weren't you?”

“Yes.”

“Frankly, among all the candidates I chose, you were the most...”

“Y-yes!”

“Hopeless among them.”

“There's a limit to being frank right!?”

In front of the young man who was exhausting himself with all his strength, the man with black hair dressed all in black spoke as if it was completely natural.

“I went out scouting guys based on how much hope I had in them. In that case, isn't it natural that the guy I picked last was the one I was expecting the least from?”

“...Well, that makes sense, but...”

The young man puffed out his cheeks in dissatisfaction. He then looked down at his hands which had just received a pair of swords from his master.

“But there's a better way of putting it you know.”

“You were, the most like me. That's why I expected the least from you.”

“—”

That was a fact that Iska had heard for the first time. His master was usually silent and emotionless, always casting a listless gaze over him. It was the first time he heard his master's 'true thoughts.'

“Don't let go of those star swords.”

“Of course. It's a precious memento from my master after all... Ow!”

He was struck. Don't just make it a memento on your own. Don't just go off and kill your master. So he said, and then finally—

“Those swords, are the only hope of saving the world.”

“...Eh?”

“The star swords will obey you. Just by touching them you can control them, and none other will be able to make use of them. So I leave them to you.”

The duty of putting an end to this war between man and witch that has been going on for a hundred years, falls upon you — the Successor of Black Steel. So said his master.



The scorching earth was cracked dry by the incessant heat pouring down on it, it was a wasteland where only a couple weeds could be seen sprouting out here and there. If one were to walk on it barefoot, it was likely that one's feet would be burned before

even a second could pass.

The Vuishada wastelands.

A single buggy was racing down a path through that giant wasteland at an intense speed.

“Iska-nii, wake up, wake up. We're almost at Ayin.”

“Hm, already?”

Jostled by Nene from the driver's seat, Iska rubbed his eyelids in the passenger seat. He recalled up until the point that they left the Imperial capital before sunrise, but he didn't remember anything after that.

“It's already close to noon. This guy's been running for a good six hours. Iska-nii, seriously, no matter how much I talked to you, you were just sleeping like a rock.”

“Sorry...”

“Uun, Nene also got to see Iska-nii's sleeping face for the first time in a while anyways.”

Nene's voice livened up cheerfully.

“You said you were having trouble sleeping ever since coming back from the Nelka forest too.”

“Un... I saw, a dream of my master for the first time in a long while. A memory from when me and Jhin were worked to the bone. Rather, it was a nightmare.”

“A dream of Black-sensei?”

Nene spoke as she gripped the wheel of the car.

“How nostalgic~. You haven't seen a dream of Black-sensei all this time right?”

“It's probably, because I haven't used the star swords in so long. Even though he told me to treat them precious, I had them confiscated by the Eight Grand Apostles. I'm relieved they gave them back to me.”

Iska looked down at the two swords leaning against his seat.

The land that the buggy was racing across was affiliated with neither the Empire nor the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. The wasteland was even designated by the entire world as a nature zone where only beasts ran wild. It was a land where there was even once a report of an enormous dragon being discovered long ago. The road itself was classified as safe, but by all rights it was not a place one should be dozing off in.

“Aaaaah, what a failure~. Why did I have to sign up for part time work right when Iska-nii decided to go out?”

Along with a remarkably dissatisfied sigh, Nene let go of the driving wheel.

“Jhin is helping out at the gunsmith, and Captain Mismis is out shopping was it?”

“That's true, but~, even Nene wants to go play in the Neutral City together with Iska-nii you know?”

The young woman with a ponytail set her head down on Iska's lap. All while the car was barrelling down the road at a terrifying speed. Even so, the young woman who could no longer see in front of the vehicle was perfectly manipulating the vehicle by nudging the wheel with her leg.

“Nene, it's dangerous if you don't look while you drive. Driving with your leg is a little...”

“But it's been so long since I've been together with Iska-nii.”

“Has it really been that long?”

Iska casually looked over Nene in the driver's seat once more.

...But, she certainly became somewhat adult-like?

...She has grown taller, and I feel that her expression is more womanly.

It was a year of puberty.

While Iska was imprisoned, that childish girl had grown taller, and her figure had

become increasingly womanly. He wondered that if her hair that was held up in a ponytail was let down, whether she would look even more so.

“Hup.”

Nene suddenly corrected her posture and her ponytail bounced in the air as she spoke in dissatisfaction.

“Aaah... We're already there. I should have just driven slower.”

—The Neutral City Ayin.

The city built upon an oasis in the middle of the wastelands came into sight as they proceeded towards the gate of the enormous walls which surrounded it.

“Thanks Nene. I'll be taking the regular bus to get back, so.”

“Yeah yeah. See you later Iska-nii!”

“...Un. Ummm, where's the theatre again?”

After seeing off the buggy as it kicked up a cloud of dust, Iska turned towards the streets of the city.

The Neutral City—due to the hundred years of conflict which split the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household agency, it was the generic name given to the city which did not participate in either camp.

“The Neutral City huh, it's been a super long time. Just how many years has it since I've been here?”

Iska glanced at the main street where there the impressive theatres were lined up. Next to the majestic and noble concert hall made of wood was a gorgeous opera house made with a modern design.

“But, just as usual, that's quite the crowd.”

It was the land where culture and the arts were blooming. All the artists who hated the war between the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency were accepted here. It was a land where painting, music, poetry and carving, among all

other sorts of arts developed.

The Neutral City Ayin was the capital of opera. Buskers on the street were singing songs as they pleased, and tourists filled the streets everywhere Iska looked as they attentively listening to those buskers.

“—Wait, this is bad. It's already time for the curtains to rise!?”

Iska dashed down the main street while grasping his ticket.

“It's supposed to be the third building on the main street right? Crap, it's already starting!”

Iska headed towards the ticket window of an opera house with a modern design using white as its motif.

“Can I still get in? Eh, just by a hair? Great, thanks!”

He continued to run through the now quiet passage towards the performance hall.

“...Excuse me. I need to get in.”

Carefully opening the door, Iska entered the hall. Because the performance was just about start, the interior was pitch black. Relying on the faint lighting from the emergency lights, he went off to find his assigned seat.

“The front row on the upper floor huh. As one would expect of Captain Mismis, she even fusses over the seat at operas.”

Because of the darkness, he couldn't see the faces of those around him, but he could tell that they were mostly ladies in rather affluent dresses and nobles travelling incognito from other territories who brought their families along.

“Now then, please enjoy 'The Female Knight Beatrix's Blighted Love.'”

The announcement rang throughout the hall. The curtains around the stage rose, and the opera began before the hundreds of spectators in attendance.

'Farewell Beatrix, I can no longer live together with you.'

‘...Yes. Farewell, Ahzel. I believe the next time we meet will not be in a church, but on the battlefield.”

It was the middle of the performance. The emotional performance by the actress playing the heroine of the story together with the musical accompaniment of the orchestra coloured the stage in sorrow and passion—

“...Aaah. I get it. I get why Captain Mismis loves this so much.”

Mixed in with the other spectators enthralled by the performance, Iska quietly muttered.

Enchanted by the female knight's dignity and way of life, they all felt the emotions coming from her blighted love. Currently, affected by Beatrix's sorrowful circumstances, Iska could sense other spectators who were moved to tears holding back their breath. During that, for some reason, he could feel some sort of cold sensation just around himself.

“Aah Beatrix! To fall in love with a knight from an enemy nation... No matter how much you love him, it is a love that could never be fulfilled. Is it alright to have such a sorrowful love!? It is far too much! Why does god bestow... Bestow such a cruel fate... Uuu!”

Of all things, it seemed that the young woman sitting next to him was easily moved to tears. Overcome with emotion by the final stage of the story, she was crying aloud and seemed unable to wipe away her tears no matter how much she wiped her face with a handkerchief — and Iska was no longer able to focus on the stage.

“That stupid Ahzel, why with a man like you!?”

“Shh, your voice is too loud Alice-sama. Everyone else is watching quietly.”

“B-but...”

“Good grief. What happened to the handkerchief? Even though yours had gotten drenched in tears and I handed you mine as well.”

“...That one, is also completely soaked through.”

“You're crying that much!?”

The young woman was wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. Iska couldn't see her clearly because of the darkness, but judging from her voice he could tell that she was probably in her teens. Her companion in the the seat next to her also seemed to be the same in this regard.

“Um, you can take this if you'd like.”

“Eh?”

In a quiet voice, Iska pulled out his own handkerchief.

...Handing a handkerchief to a lady that one didn't even know the name of was a scene that nobles loved since long ago.

...It wasn't supposed to be all that peculiar.

It was also the case that Iska was unable to stand by while someone was troubled right next to him, but he also had the pragmatic motive that he could not concentrate on the performance while she was sobbing like that.

“I haven't used it at all and it is perfectly clean. So, um, I just thought you would be quite troubled if left alone like that.”

“ ... ”

She must have had some reluctance to accept a handkerchief from someone she did not know, but even so, she seemed unable to stop her overflowing tears, and timidly stretched out her hand.

“Thank you very much.”

...Hmm? Just where did I hear that voice before.

Iska felt like he found that voice to be familiar, but because her voice was distorted by her crying, he couldn't accurately pin it down. It must have been his imagination. Processing that thought quickly, Iska decided to focus his attention on the closing moments of the performance.

And so the curtains fell—

The applause from the audience filled the theatre while the lights had started to come back on...

“Uuu... *sniffle*, how pitiful, Beatrix!”

“Alice-sama, look, it has already ended. Before the lights finish turning on, please at the very least finish wiping away your tears.”

“B-but...”

The young woman stood up while wiping her face with the handkerchief. She then bowed down towards Iska who has still sitting in the seat next to her.

“U-um... Sorry for soaking your handkerchief. I shall reimburse you for this. Rin, please make arrangements to present him with a gift made of the finest velvet.”

“Eh!? N-no, that's quite alright! That handkerchief is just a cheap one, so it's okay.”

“No, that will not do. It is something that was granted to me after I exposed such an embarrassing side of myself. It is not a problem of whether it was cheap or expensive.”

While gripping the handkerchief in both hands, she earnestly shook her head to the side.

“Um, please allow me to once more express my thanks.”

Along with a sincere mutter, the young woman took one step forward—

And just at that time, the lights turned on completely.

“Thank you for the...”

Below the shining and brilliant chandelier, the young woman's bright blonde hair and lovely features came into sight.

The Ice Witch of Calamity Aliceliese.

The one gripping the handkerchief in front of him, was the perpetrator of the fierce battle that Iska went through three days ago in the Nelka forest.

“...Heh?”

“Wh..... Wh-wh-wh-wh-why are you here!?”

The skirt of the princess of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency fluttered with a thud. She was not wearing the high class royal garments that she had on the battlefield, but was instead wearing a one piece dress that one could find sold in any clothing store in any city. She gave off the complete atmosphere of a young woman travelling incognito.

“You were shadowing me I see. Very well, then let us settle the score right—Muguu!”

“Alice-sama, you must not! This is the Neutral City!”

The one binding Alice's arms behind her, was her attendant Rin.

“In this city, all forms of conflict are strictly forbidden. That is the law of the Neutral City. Even if it is your ancestors' enemy or an Imperial general, if you lay your hands on them...”

—One, any conflict in the Neutral City is strictly forbidden.

—Two, as a preamble to the previous statement, the one who laid their hands on the other party first is the violating party.

—Three, all cultures are accepted, and one is to enjoy oneself with the arts.

These were the rules which applied to the Neutral City.

“...I know that. If I did something here, all neutral territories would treat it as a violation of the rules and turn against us. If that happened it would be pretty serious.”

Rin let go of Alice's hand as she then bit down on her lips.



“However, to think that you were appreciating the opera right next to me. No wonder I couldn't calm down.”

“No, you seemed to be so focused on the play that you were wailing.”

“~~~~~!? Th-this is just sweat from my eyes! Forget everything you saw today, you hear me!?”

Alice took a step back while stomping her feet.

“Alice-sama, if you raise your voice like that you'll draw too much attention.”

“Aah geez!”

Finally realizing that the surrounding audience was staring at her, the young blond haired woman who had tears in her eyes and was blushing became even more flushed than before.

“I'll withdraw here. I bid you farewell, Iska!”

“...U-un. Take care.”

Alice gracefully bowed as she lifted her skirt with both hands in a graceful manner.

“Alice-sama, what are you doing?”

“Eh!? Ah... Y-you're wrong, Rin! It was a force of habit!”

After the young woman seemed to have given her farewell as she would at the royal palace on the spur of the moment, she blushed all the way to her ears as she ran out of the hall. Iska was then left alone where he was.

“I'm the one who was shocked here...”

Putting his hand to his chest which was beating like a hammer, Iska let out his breath all at once.

“...I thought my heart would stop.”

“That's what I want to say. Just what would we have done if Alice-sama went on a rampage?”

Leaving the hall behind, the two of them ran past the crowd and arrived outdoors. Coming out onto the main street, Alice finally felt a sense of relief.

“We're not being followed right?”

“We are not. Until we exited the hall, that swordsman didn't move a single step. However, we should probably make the assumption that he will.”

The Neutral City did not discriminate between the Empire and the Imperial Household Agency. Because citizens from either country could come in freely, the possibility of bumping into someone familiar existed.

“...But even so, to think he was in the seat right beside me.”

“In the first place, that man has seen your face before. Any other soldier would not be able to recognize you. Encountering allies or enemies within the Neutral City is something that cannot really be avoided due to its nature.”

“Th-that's right...! Let's go grab something to eat and pull ourselves together.”

After closing her eyes and shaking off her idle thoughts, Alice began walking down the main street at a quick pace.

“If I remember right there's a renowned pasta shop around here. My preparations are perfect after all!”

“Alice-sama really loves pasta huh.”

“I could have nothing but pasta for a whole month.”

“Whether or not you can, you mustn't.”

“Don't be so obstinate. Come on, this way.”

Grabbing Rin's hand, she headed north down the street. Coming to the end of the street which looked out on the plaza, a signboard for a pasta shop came into sight.

“My apologies. The lunchtime crowd has just arrived.”

Looking at the two girls who arrived, a waitress wearing an apron bowed down her head and apologized.

“If you have a reservation or are willing to share a table, then I could guide you inside right away though...”

“We don't mind. Now then, Rin, let's go in.”

The two of them lined up on one side of a table that could seat four.

“Here, Alice-sama, some water.”

“Thank you, Rin. I just happened to be thirsty.”

Perhaps because she was crying so much at the opera house, even her throat was quite parched. She immediately brought the glass of water that Rin passed her to her lips. And as she did, the waitress guided over another customer to an open seat at their table.

“Iska-sama, we have confirmed your reservation. Please come this way.”

“Buuu!?”

And it came flying out. For the first time in her life, Alice let loose the water that was in her mouth with the strength of a water gun.

“Uwah!?”

In a panic, the young man backed up from the table.

“What are you doing?”

“That's what I want to—*cough*... W-water, in my throat... Wh-what are you doing

here!?”

With a hand at her mouth, she scowled at the young swordsman from the Empire.

“You bastard, not just once, but twice! Like I thought, you've been tailing Alice-sama!”

As one would expect, this time she was unable to keep quiet. As Rin stood up from her seat, she put her hand on top of the dagger concealed beneath her skirt.

...At that rate, she is going to violate the taboo of drawing a sword within the Neutral City.

...No. The clause forbidding conflict stated that 'the one to lay their hand on the other first is at fault.'

If the Imperial swordsman attacked first, Alice and Rin could counterattack squarely claiming it was self defence.

“Ummm, are you still, misunderstanding something here?”

“How can you be so shameless? There is no longer room for any doubt.”

Iska raised both his hands to show he had no intention to resist. And in response, Rin thrust out her finger at him.

“After splitting up at the opera house, weren't you going to go do your own thing? Then why did you come to this shop? If you have an excuse then let's hear it!”

“But you know, this is the closest restaurant to the opera house. It's also quite famous. Besides, the one who made a reservation for this table was me, didn't you two come without one?”

“...”

Rin was the one to freeze up at Iska's indifferent reply.

“...What do you think, Alice-sama?”

“He has a point. But you cannot let your guard down, Rin. Stay vigilant.”

“No, you know I can hear you consulting each other right? Besides, as you can see, I'm unarmed. I left my swords with the guardhouse at the gate after all.”

While still raising his hands, Iska span on the spot. Nothing that resembled a weapon could be seen. It seemed he was insisting to show that he had no intention to fight.

“...I get it. For now, I'll believe you.”

Alice and Rin sat side by side, and the young man sat down across from them.

“Alice-sama, is this really alright? Even if this is the Neutral City, sitting together for a meal with an Imperial soldier is a little...”

“If we step aside here, won't it look like we were intimidated?”

The Ice Witch of Calamity ran away. If that kind of rumour spread, it would strengthen the morale of the Imperial troops, while also making it difficult for her to show her face to her subordinates within the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.

“I-in any case, let's eat...”

Alice went to pick up the menu on the table. And as she did, her fingers touched the tips of Iska's fingers as he also went to pick up the menu.

“Kyaa!? S-sorry!”

“...Ah, n-no, I should also... Sorry.”

Iska drew back his hand immediately.

“...P-please go ahead first.”

“...You should go ahead and decide first. I shall yield to you here. You reached out to it, did you not?”

“...I, reached out to it thinking I would hand it over to you.”

“...I-I also intended to do so!”

As a result of their negotiations, the menu was left open in the middle of the table, and

it was settled that Alice and Iska would read it from the left and right from opposite sides of the table.

...There is a flaw in that our faces are quite close though.

...Wait, just what am I thinking about? We're only looking at a menu.

Alice instinctively averted her gaze as she thought that. It wasn't like she didn't have men among her relatives in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, but back at the royal palace she didn't know one that was this close to her in age. She wasn't used to it.

“Ummm...”

As he suddenly began talking to her, Alice instinctively put herself on guard.

“D-do you need something?”

“Have you decided on something?”

I've decided to tear you apart limb from limb right here you bastard — he was an Imperial soldier where it wouldn't have been all that strange for him to make such a declaration, but instead he questioned her with upturned eyes.

“...I have. I'd like to make an order.”

“Okay. I'll be right there!”

A cheerful waitress came running over from further inside the shop.

“What would you like?”

““I will have the salmon and zucchini fresh cream pasta. I'd like it boiled '*ben cotta*' and I'd like the portion size to be small. After the meal I would like black tea with a single sugar please.””

Alice and Iska.

The two of them said the exact same thing at the same time. Their words piled atop each other so smoothly it could be described as lovely.

“...Eh?”

“...Huh?”

...Did I really say that?

Because they spoke together so fluently, even Alice herself doubted who was the one to talk. Sure enough, across the table, Iska also had a bewildered expression.

“Dear customers, you certainly do get along well huh. Are you companions~?”

““You're wrong!””

Once more, their responses were beautifully in sync.

“Alice-sama, do calm yourself.”

“Don't say it, Rin. I know, this is just for today. It's really just a coincidence of a coincidence of a coincidence!”

Alice took a deep breath in a way that the young man before her would not be able to tell she was doing so.

...It's alright. I am calm... It seems his tastes when it comes to theatre and food is lined up with mine, but that is irrelevant.

Until the food arrived, they endured the awkward atmosphere in complete silence.

“Anyways, the food is here. Let's eat while it's still hot.”

Alice stuck her fork into the plate of pasta before her and began winding it up — she then stopped, and suddenly raised her head. A slight curiosity suddenly passed through her mind. After piling on so many coincidences, there was one thing she wanted to confirm with the Imperial soldier before her.

“Do you like pasta?”

“...Me?”

Perhaps because he never thought that she would talk to him, his reaction was slightly

delayed.

“There's nobody but you here is there?”

“I like it. Rather it may be my favourite. I like it like this with cream, but it's also delicious when it is only seasoned with salt and pepper.”

“Oh my. You do understand. It's quite simplistic but also quite tasty isn't it?”

Whenever she talked to Rin about it, the only reply she ever got was 'Please eat everything without being picky about what is good or bad.' When she talked to the retainers back at the royal castle, they would only curtly reply 'Good for you,' and cut her off.

And so the reply from the young man from the Empire was a new sensation to Alice.

It was fun.

And so she naturally ended up getting excited while speaking to Iska.

“But for me, when it is this hot outside, I also can't pass up a nice cold vegetable pasta.”

“Aah, cold vegetable pasta is quite nice isn't it? Whenever they sell some sweet tomatoes in the market I would definitely make some.”

“Yes! Cold vegetable pasta with tomatoes is delicious isn't it? Me too! Me too! When it's so hot outside, even if it was every day I could—”

“Alice-sama, you've stopped eating.”

“...Ah.”

Admonished by Rin who was clearing her throat, Alice leaked out a quiet voice. The young man before her eyes was a soldier of the Empire. He had seen her face. He was also a combatant worth a thousand at the level of the Holy Apostles. She had completely forgotten that.

“S-sorry. I interrupted your meal...”

“I-I also must apologize...”

The two of them bowed down apologetically.

And the scene of a quiet meal once more returned. Or so Alice thought, as the attendant who had already finished eating began to mumble to herself in a quiet voice.

“It's common sense that pasta should be boiled '*al dente*.' This is why amateurs are so...”

““It absolutely must be '*ben cotta*!'””

As Rin let out a sigh, Alice and Iska yelled out together perfectly in sync.

Within the black celestial sphere of the heavens, the stars in the skies shined like a box of jewels.

With an uncountable number of constellations, a shooting star shot across the sky. It was a night sky from the royal palace that Alice would not doubt as the most beautiful in the world. However, she was not even looking at it.

“Alice-sama, please keep what happened during the day strictly to yourself.”

“...”

Alice listened to Rin while lying face down on her bed.

“By all means, I should be reporting this to her Majesty the Queen. Even if it was not a battlefield, you happened to meet with an Imperial soldier after all.”

“You cannot fight in the Neutral City. Wasn't Rin the one to say that?”

“I never thought that after the opera house, we would end up sitting together with him for a meal.”

Within Alice's private room in the Nebulis royal palace, the 'Jewel Case Bell,' Rin stood close to the wall as she spoke in an unusually emotionally stifled tone.

“Fortunately, from today's conversation it seems he will not speak of the secret of the Imperial Household Agency. If I was not confident in this fact, it is something that must be reported to her Majesty the Queen no matter what.”

“...I know.”

The other party was a pet dog of the vile Empire. They were the ones who persecuted her ancestors as witches and warlocks. Iska was one of them. However, just what was that unsatisfied sensation swelling up within her?

“This.”

Next to her pillow was a completely plain handkerchief. He had said it was something

that could be purchased anywhere you look.

“I missed my chance to return it...”

It was the handkerchief she borrowed at the opera house. Because it was something she used to wipe her tears away, she couldn't return it as it was. On the other hand, she didn't know what to do about it and ended up taking it back with her.

“It's a personal effect of an Imperial soldier. There should be no problem in throwing it away.”

“...But.”

“Like I've been saying, please forget everything that happened today. The swordsman known as Iska is an enemy. He is not just Alice-sama's enemy, but the enemy of every single person who is Alice-sama's brethren.”

Rin flipped up her skirt. And the moment Alice thought that, Rin had grasped the daggers she had for self defence in both hands.

It only took an instant.

Also concealed within were thin metal needles, steel thread and even small bombs. There was a great number of dark tools hidden within those housekeeper garments that Alice did not even know the names for.

She was a genius who mastered all martial arts. That was the other face of the young woman known as Rin.

“The old master of the training tower was quite disappointed. Since a pupil that he had trained to master the sword, spear, archery, torture and everything else he knew would be a mere attendant. Even though that little girl had the talent to become the greatest martial artist in the Imperial Household Agency.”

“It is the old master's habit to become talkative while drunk. But even so, I cannot envision the scene of me winning in battle against the swordsman known as Iska. Be it with a sword or in martial arts, or even using my star spirit to its maximum effect.”

“Even you?”

“Yes. Depending on the battle, I feel that even the old master would be in danger.”

With a clink, Rin returned the daggers to their sheathes.

“Alice-sama should understand this best. You revealed the 'Flower of Ice' that you were keeping hidden from even the Holy Apostles to a mere soldier... That swordsman is a monster. At some time, when Alice-sama must challenge the Empire, the one who would pose to stand in your way as the largest obstacle, may very well be that swordsman.”

Rin's expression as she said this was mixed with vexation. Despite being Alice's escort, she now knew that there was an opponent within the Empire that she could not win against. She likely resented her own worthlessness.

“And so, even if you have something on your mind from today, please forget it all. That swordsman is the greatest component of unease to the Imperial Household Agency.”

Rin's advice was reasonable. Iska's strength was something Alice herself witnessed as inhuman. Based on the fact that he was still in his teens, she couldn't even imagine how terrifying an opponent he would become after accumulating even more experience and training.

...However, from the atmosphere during day.

...I could not sense a single hint of that bloodcurdling dread.

Rin said it was only natural that he would suppress his fighting spirit within the Neutral City, but Alice had another point of view. At that time, he had absolutely no blood thirst at all. It wasn't that he was suppressing or erasing his fighting spirit, he really had no intention of fighting in the least.

...Moreover, my star spirit did not react even once.

...Even though it would tell me when my subordinates showed just the slightest amount of discontent towards me.

Her star spirit did not consider him an enemy at that time.

And above all else, they watched an opera together, had a meal together, and for just an instant, she had let her guard down. The fact that she was conscious of this was

likely the biggest problem.

She couldn't become completely heartless.

And so she remembered her hesitation in throwing away the handkerchief that was given to her.

“...But I do believe that Rin is also responsible.”

“Meaning?”

“Because Rin said something like, 'It's common sense that pasta should be boiled '*al dente*,' that I ended up strangely hitting it off with Iska.”

“All I said was the truth. Pasta is at it's best '*al dente*.' I will not recognize any objections.”

“You dummy!”

Throwing her pillow at the attendant who was standing far away, Alice wrapped herself under her blanket.



Within Sector 3 of the Imperial Capital, on the first floor of Imperial Barrack 03.

In his room, Iska was sprawled across the floor staring up at the ceiling light.

“I can't sleep.”

Even though his eyelids were heavy, even when he closed his eyes for several hours, his consciousness would not fade away.

Was it nervousness? Or perhaps exaltation?

...Both are wrong.

...It is surely because I saw it.

The figure of Alice who was feared by the entire empire as the Ice Witch of Calamity,

was appreciating the exact same opera as someone from the Empire, had a meal with him, and rejoiced at everything she saw in the Neutral City.

“Nothing but lies.”

What came out of his mouth, was a small mutter akin to a gentle breeze.

“The Empire has nothing but rumours of the Ice Witch of Calamity being a cold-blooded monster. Yet she cried so much. As I thought, aren't star mages just normal people?”

That face that she showed him.

Just how many people in the Empire who abhorred the star mages would be able to conclude that Alice was the Ice Witch of Calamity upon seeing her sob like that? That delicate and slender girl.

He from the Empire, and Alice from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, not a single thing was different between them. They were just people...

““...Aaaah geez, why can't I fall asleep!?””

And at the same time, separated by a large distance within the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, the young man and woman were both complaining aloud.

Chapter 3

Those Bound by Destiny

1

With a bright blue brilliance, it was frozen in ice.

Just where in the world that was, his young self did not know. Alongside the greatest swordsman in the Empire, the 'Man of Black Steel' Crosswell, he was journeying across the lands of the continent.

'The Empire is not all there is to the world. Take a good look.'

'In ten years, or maybe even twenty, this will be a necessary experience for you.'

In the middle of their journey—Iska became separated from his master due to certain circumstances. Aiming for the light far in the distance that was the Neutral City, he was advancing through the wasteland during the night aboard a train. And the train that Iska was riding in was assaulted by a crowd of beasts who dominated that land.

He was caught in a dilemma where the small blade in his hand had broken. And the one to save Iska's life at that time, was a single witch. A shining bright blue wall of ice protected him, and stones of ice shot down the beasts.

...A witch saved me?

...Me from the Empire?

A witch of ice. He couldn't see the face of the witch as a veil of darkness covered her. She was likely a passenger on the same train that he was riding.

There was no doubt that the witch did not think that the boy riding the train from a land so far away from the Imperial Capital would be from the Empire. It was also a fact that the beasts were also attacking the witch. She defeated the beasts out of self defence, and it may have been that Iska was protected simply as a result of that.

However, no matter the reason, the fact that he was 'saved' remained true.

...Even though I was taught in the Empire that witches were cruel monsters.

...She took action to save me and the people around me?

That was the beginning.

That was the event which repainted Iska's perception of witches.

Witches... No, star mages, may not be bad people. If it was possible to hold talks with them, they may be able to come to an understanding.

While being a part of the Empire, Iska believed in that hunch even now.

In the Imperial Capital Sector 3 training area.

A murderous heat poured down from above giving off a hot wind that easily surpassed fifty Celsius.

—Desert Field.

Just as its name implied, it was the training grounds setup to simulate battle in a giant desert. The sand at their feet was extremely fine, making it even more effective at absorbing the heat from the sun, and in this facility, the temperature did not drop below forty degrees even during the winter.

“Haa... Haa... A-auuuu... W-water...!”

Four people were running around the perimeter of the field. Running at the back of the line, Mismis made a pitiful expression as if the world was ending as she screamed out.

“Wateeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!”

“You can just take a drink can't you? This is training to rehydrate while travelling after all.”

Jhin turned around while running. The rucksacks they were carrying were equipped with a water supply, and it was possible to take a drink through a straw while running.

“Instead of carrying armaments, it's the rule of this training exercise that you can drink the water you're carrying instead. Aren't you carrying a ton of water on your back?”

“I've already drank it all~. Jhin-kun, water, even just a sip, share some with me!”

“You'll get bloated.”

“Jhin-kun you bullyyyyyyy!”

While completely exhausted, she seemed energetic enough to let out a scream.

“This training ground is just weird! There's a sun lamp burning us from above, and a high temperature ventilator is blowing hot wind at our backs... We're not laundry I'm telling you!”

“They're both splendid heat weapons. Nene remembers seeing them.”

Nene pointed to the jumbo ventilator behind them.

“Since it can reproduce the conditions of a desert, it could be used for our training. And the researchers from Sector 1 are able to use the human testing data from us improve the weapon. It's a bargain deal!”

“Nene-chan is scary for being able to think that way you know!?”

The female captain was screaming about the use of the phrase human testing.

“Ah, aaah... L-look, Iska-kun... Over there... I see, an oasis... The angels are calling to me to come... Over...?”

“Captain wait! That angel is probably not a good person!”

Mismis ran over in a panic as Iska tried to stop her as she zealously aimed for the land of water.

“Hooray! F-finally, my first victory over the desert field!”

Mismis tossed the luggage on her back as she jumped.

“Captain, it used to be that you called for a stretcher only halfway through too.”

“Right, right? I've been desperately building up just my stamina in this past year after all!”

Mismis thrust her fist in the air while sweat was pouring down like a waterfall from her brow and the nape of her neck. She gave off the sense that her joy blew away her fatigue.

...But it really is amazing.

...One way or another, Captain Mismis has put in great efforts while we weren't watching.

Quickly wiping away the sweat dripping from his hair, Iska snuck in a glance at Mismis behind him.

She had a petite figure and child-like face which could only be seen as around thirteen, maybe fourteen years old at most. Because she had such a child-like appearance, even the younger regular soldiers would look down on her, but Mismis pushed on and put in effort without being disheartened. And that was on full display in the results of their training just now.

“Aaah. Iska-nii, you're really staring at Captain Mismis.”

Nene puffed out her cheeks.

“Iska-nii likes that kind of thing~?”

“...What kind of thing?”

“A sexy lady.”

Mismis had taken off her jacket and was lightly dressed. Her exposed upper arms were flushed from the heat due to physical activity and her clothes clung to her body from the large amount of sweat coming out of her, making the lines of her body quite distinct.

Her two breasts poked out at her shirt and she had charming lines at the hip. Her voluptuous body that was dripping with sweat created a gap with her childish figure

and face, and was sensational enough to make one aware that she was in fact an 'adult.'

“...How nice~. Captain, despite being short, the places that stick out really stick out huh?”

With an envious look in her eyes, Nene frowned.

“Eh? What places Nene-chan?”

“So you say~. Iska-nii is also looking at the Captain with a fishy... Muguu?”

“I am definitely not!”



Sealing Nene's mouth in a fluster, Iska shook his head to the sides with all his strength as he replied.

"It's a misunderstanding I'm telling you, Nene."

"...Really?"

"Really. I was just—"

Just as Iska was about to continue speaking, the wind roaring out of the high temperature ventilator changed. The hot wind they were being exposed to that could render a raw egg cooked all on its own took a complete turn and became a pleasant, cool and gentle wind.

"...Oh my. How refreshing. It's as refreshing as an electric fan."

Mismis tilted her head to the side in curiosity.

"A malfunction?"

"There's no way it would I'm telling you~. I switched it over to cooling mode just for Mismis' sake."

"Kya!?"

The one to grab the shoulders of the captain sitting down on the bench, was another woman.

"Wh-what, so it was Lyshia-chan?"

"Yaaaho! Iska-chi, Nene-tan, Jhin-jhin, it's been about a year huh? Do ya remember me?"

The girl that Mismis referred to as Lyshia-chan gave an exaggerated bow. She was a woman who had clever looking and graceful features which matched her intellectual black rim glasses well. Coupled with her tall figure, even when she wore combat garments, she looked good. This woman with an exceptional appearance was someone Iska knew well.

"Do you even need to ask? There aren't any soldiers who don't know any of the Holy

Apostles in active service.”

“Iska-chi was a colleague until a year ago after all huh?”

Lyshia winked through the lens of her glasses.

Lyshia Ean Empire—

To describe her in a single phrase, she was an unparalleled 'omnipotent genius' boasted of by the Empire. Academics, martial arts, shooting skill, survival skills and even strategic command. Having demonstrated talent in every field, she graduated at the top of the military academy. Attaining victory in the harsh competitive exam, she climbed up from a commanding officer to a Holy Apostle in the blink of an eye.

“Now... You're a special guest of the defensive force headquarters right? It's amazing.”

“It's not all that much I'm telling ya. Iska-chi was also a Holy Apostle just up until last year.”

Lyshia laughed it off lightly. And behind her...

“Even if he was the youngest to rise to the status of a Holy Apostle, Iska was the lowest seat. You who hold the fifth seat, are so to speak, one of the right hands of the Emperor. Even among the Holy Apostles, you are on a different level.”

Jhin, who had been cooling off in the shade of a tree, stood up with a tiresome expression.

“So, what kind of troublesome role did you come to push on us?”

“It's just a tiny request. And that's how it is, so Mismis.”

Sticking her tongue out playfully, Lyshia then thrust her finger at Mismis.

“For your next mission, it ended up that Mismis' squad will be working under me. And so, though it is after the fact, good to meet ya!”

“Eeeh.....”

“Oya, dissatisfied?”

“But you know, Lyshia-chan is too smart, so I wonder if I can properly understand your strategies is all~.”

“It's ooooookay. Its me and Mismis after all.”

Mismis looked at Lyshia with a frown. As for Lyshia, she started rubbing her former classmate's head.

“I'll get a pamphlet made of the strategies just for Mismis' use. You can't lose it you hear?”

“Really!? Then it's okay!”

“So that's how it is, I'll leave the creation of the strategic pamphlet to you, okay Jhin?”

“I'm making it?”

“I didn't say I was gonna make it myself. In any case, I came here today just to greet everyone. Everyone here except for the captain are all elites after all.”

“...Lyshia-chan?”

“Ahahah, it's a joke, just a joke. Mismis is also splendid. I'm the one saying it so there's no mistaking it!”

Mismis puffed out her cheeks as Lyshia rubbed her head. Was it because they were friendly classmates? A Holy Apostle under the direct command of the Emperor acting in such a way with a single squad captain likely wasn't something that could be seen so frequently.

—A strict doctrine of skill supremacy.

To a young captain like Mismis, a Holy Apostle was said to be a 'formidable target to knock down one day.' To a Holy Apostle, someone at the level of a captain was said to be 'someone they already knocked down that was below them.'

...The reason Lyshia-san and Captain Mismis get along so well.

...Is because our Captain has a character that is unrelated to knocking people down or any kind of competition.

She had come by the squad aimlessly in the past as well, but at those times, without discussing any strategy, he recalled that they would get heated up talking about things like shopping. It also came down to Lyshia's self confidence. Precisely because she had unwavering confidence in her own talent and skill, she could get away with such an easygoing attitude.

"But you sure are moving fast aren't you?"

Facing off against someone who held a much higher position than him, Jhin spoke with a bold smile in a way that could be called defiant.

"Seventeen hours after Iska's release, we made an expedition to the Nelka forest. In the past year, that would be the only mission any of us took part in. Despite that, I'm surprised you made such a snap judgment to pull us under your command. If I were you, I'd let us swim around a little longer."

"Is this about getting a little bit of a better assessment of your abilities? Hmmmm, of course I have that intention. But I think I already have a rough grasp of you guys anyways."

Behind those glasses, the eyes of the Holy Apostle contracted like a crescent moon.

"The battle report from the Nelka forest was well written wasn't it? Accurate and brief. Of course there wasn't a single typo or omission. Jhin's the one who wrote it right?"

"Of course."

"Just from reading that, I can tell your senses haven't dulled at all."

Leaving them a wink, Lyshia turned around and faced Iska.

"By the way Iska-chi, can I interview you a little?"

"Interview?"

"How's your condition? I've heard about it from Mis-chi you see? After the expedition to the Nelka forest, you haven't been sleeping well right?"

"...Just a little."

It was the duty of a soldier to report to one's captain. As long as it was something passed on to Mismis, as a Holy Apostle, Lyshia would be able to confirm it. However, Iska himself didn't know why he was unable to sleep well lately either.

The Ice Witch of Calamity Alice.

For some reason, her face would cross his mind and he would be unable to sleep.

"Well that's quite the imperfect answer you gave huh. I heard from Mis-chi that you went to see an opera, but did the change of pace from the other day not fix your mood or something?"

"It was enjoyable. Ummm, it was also a while since I've been to the Neutral City."

Iska greatly shook his head.

...Saying that I met Alice in the Neutral City.

...Is really something I can't say here huh.

"Ah, that's right. Captain Mismis, thank you very much. The opera was very interesting."

"Wasn't it? Wasn't it~? That kind of blighted love is nice once in a while too right? It's painful for the heart, but it feels kind of fulfilling right?"

Mismis put her hand to her heart delightedly.

"Lyshia-chan said it was boring though."

"I'm the kinda person who doesn't get that artsy stuff. When it comes to Iska-chi, he had an appreciation for music and painting since the beginning after all."

"Yeah. But Lyshia-san, did I ever talk to you about my hobbies?"

"That kinda intelligence gathering is my hobby. The love life and gossip of my subordinates are my favourite meals."

Lyshia then put her finger into her chest pocket.

“Iska-chi, do you know Vibran Salil?”

“He was a court painter for the Empire right? From here it would be... about one hundred and fifty years ago, he was an oil painter who was active before the hundred years war.”

“As expected. Then it sounds like you'll take these off me.”

His superior officer was making an impish smile. And what she took out from her chest pocket, was a single small ticket.

“Seems there'll be an exhibition.”

“...Of Vibran's paintings? In the Neutral City?”

“Yup yup. I hoisted it from a subordinate during some gambling, but it seems Vibran would enjoy it more if Iska went to see it instead of me.”

“But I only just got a day off the other day...”

“I'll make you work in proportion to how much you rested, so it's fine. Iska-chi is important in the next mission after all.”

Lishia rubbed Mismis' head, and contrary to expectations, she stopped and turned around on the spot.

“That's how it is, so Mismis' squad is now happily working under me. We'll assemble next week, and being joint training next month. So it's fine for you to keep training until then, or just like Iska-chi, it's fine for Jhin-jhin and Nene-tan to take a break too.”

“What about me? Can I take a break too?”

“Mismis is an officer so no can do~. You have strategy meetings with me.”

“Cheapo!”

Mismis puffed her cheeks out like a child as Lishia teased her cheerfully. And setting the two of them aside...

“Back to Ayin huh...”

What came to Iska's mind, was his reunion just two days ago. As one would expect, another such coincidence would not happen again. This time he was going to the solo exhibition for the Imperial artist Vibran. It was also later in the day. There was no reason for him to meet her again in such a place.

...In the end, Alice still has my handkerchief.

...Wait, what am I thinking about?

As if to blow away such idle thoughts from his head, Iska shook his head greatly.

The Nebulis Royal Palace.

It was the castle positioned in the deepest part of the Imperial Household Agency founded by star mages. The castle was divided into three sharp spires, and each and every spire was open to the public all year round. In other words, the populace could inspect the entire castle. That was the established faith between the royal family and the citizens.

—There was nothing to hide.

—We are all comrades fighting the Empire.

However, there was a place within the royal palace that was not open to the public. It was a region that was restricted to even those of the palace unless they had the express permission of royalty.

“Sorry I'm late, Rin. Did you wait long?”

“No. I have also just arrived.”

As Rin stood in the darkness lit by candlelight, Alice came jogging over.

“Every time I look at this place, it's quite eerie isn't it?”

It was an underground passage that made use of a natural limestone cave. The air was damp and lukewarm. A wind that came from somewhere or other circulated around the limestone cave and gently brushed Alice's nape as it went by. Every time it did, she couldn't help but feel it was the chill of some kind of curse.

“...Rin, save me.”

“Alice-sama, please to not glue yourself to me so timidly. You are not a child after all.”

“B-but, what do I do if a ghost comes out...?”

“Alice-sama's star spirit is likely far more powerful than a ghost. Besides—”

As Rin walked next to her, she continued speaking as if implying 'why after all this time?'

"The ones who is sleeping here, is not yet dead."

"...I know that."

As they progressed in silence down the uneven path, a dim golden light came into sight.

—The Golden Altar.

A crimson carpet was spread on the rock's surface, and sitting atop a treasure stand was a seven pronged brass candlestick, scriptures written in ancient words, and many holy urns put in place of people whose names Alice did not know.

"I have arrived late, mother."

"You are just on time."

The woman wearing orchid royal garments turned around. Her hair that was illuminated by the candlelight was golden with a tinge of brown. Her ruby coloured eyes showed both kindness and strictness, as well as her noble pride.

This was Mirabelle Lou Nebulis VIII — Alice's mother and the current queen of Nebulis.

However, it was strange for her mother to call her somewhere other than the audience chamber.

"Alice, about the other day, you said that you fought with a swordsman of the Empire did you not? Though he was not a Holy Apostle, he held strength that approached that of a Holy Apostle correct?"

"Yes."

It was about Iska. Alice had made that report about the battle that day in the Nelka forest. Alice's mother Mirabelle was also a star mage with long military service. She had experience fighting against the Holy Apostles, and she was very familiar with the organization of the Imperial army. If it was her, it was possible that she knew of his identity. However. Even her mother did not seem to be sure of who the swordsman

known as Iska was.

“...Is that so?”

“Mother? Is something the matter?”

The queen moved behind the altar.

“Please come here, both of you.”

“This is... The esteemed Founder's bindings.....!?”

Within the limestone cave, Rin's voice which approached a scream echoed out repeatedly. Looking at the black pillar standing before her, the young attendant stepped back as if in fear.

—The Founder Nebulis.

The black pillar upon which that great witch was crucified was right there.

Her tanned skin and wavy pearl grey hair was impressive. As the founder of the star mages' paradise, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, she was an ancient star mage endowed with the ultimate star spirit. Her outward appearance appeared no older than a woman in her thirties or forties.

“One hundred years ago, our dear Founder stood against an Imperial army numbering in the tens of thousands all on her own. And even now, she is still alive.”

The current queen of Nebulis spoke with a meek tone.

“The Founder had a twin sister. That was Nebulis the First. Including myself and Alice, she was the beginning of the royal bloodline. The Empire did not know that the Founder that they feared as the 'Great Witch' had a little sister. That is why, when Nebulis the First was lost, the Empire rejoiced that the Great Witch had vanished.”

The Great Witch Nebulis was alive. This was a fact that was only known by the royal family, and Rin's lineage which had served the royal family since time immemorial. The younger twin sister served as the queen of the Imperial Household Agency, had a child, and was later called Nebulis the First.

However, the elder sister was different. The Founder who held the star spirit that was said to be the oldest in the world was even able to isolate herself from the flow of time with her power. And even now, she was waiting for the opportunity to enact vengeance on the Empire.

“Alice-sama, the esteemed Founder's binding have been damaged!”

What was supporting the sleeping woman's body in the air, were latches in the shape of chains tied to the pillar. And they were somewhat chipped.

“The change in our dear Founder, Alice, happened at the same time that you fought with the Imperial swordsman in the Nelka forest.”

“...What does this mean?”

“Star spirits react to danger that threatens their host. For example, when the Imperial Army previously reached the Imperial Household Agency, it is said that many star spirits all reacted at once. This is the same for the Founder's star spirit.”

Nebulis' queen drew closer to the black pillar. It reached all the way to the ceiling of the limestone cave, and the woman known as the Founder was in a crucified position well above ten metres in the air.

“It is like an omen of her awakening. Do you not think so?”

Hearing the queen's words, Alice and Rin exchanged glances in silence. This phenomenon had not have occurred all the times that she had fought on the Imperial stage. However, the Founder only reacted when she fought with Iska?

“Even now we have not determined the conditions for the Founder's star spirit to react.”

The queen shook her head to the sides.

“Though, it is said that star spirits resonate with other star spirits. Because the star spirit in Alice's body is powerful, it is in question whether the Founder's star spirit is influenced when that power is manifested — that is the hypothesis of the researchers at the Star Spirit Institute.”

“Certainly, it was the first time that Alice-sama manifested her power to that level.”

Nebulis VIII and Rin exchanged words. While listening to their conversation, Alice looked up at the star mage known as the Founder.

...Reacting to my power?

...There's no way that's true. I mean...

To ascertain the limits of her star spirit, Alice secretly repeated experiments at an abandoned arena on the outskirts of the Imperial Household Agency. Naturally, she also unleashed power at the level that she did in the fight against Iska.

But, at that time, the Founder did not react. In other words, she only reacted when Alice fought with Iska. That was the only thing she could think of.

“...Iska, just who is he?”

“Did you say something Alice?”

“N-no! Nothing!”

She tried to pass off the fact that she was seriously thinking about the fight with Iska.

...I definitely, can't say it can I.

...That I just met him again the other day in the Neutral City.

Not only that, she ended up being seen wailing in appreciation of an opera, and even shared a meal at the same table. It could only be thought of as a prank by destiny... It would be better to forget it. She had to forget it. But even so, why was it that the more she thought she had to forget it, the more his face came to mind?

“At any rate.”

Nebulis VIII folded her arms.

“There are many points that are still unknown to us about the Founder's star spirit. While the researchers at the Star Spirit Institute hurry with their investigations, Alice, you will refrain yourself from standing on the battlefield. At least until the identity of the Imperial swordsman is discovered.”

“Yes. Then please excuse me here.”

—Let's go, Rin.

Conveying that with her eyes, she turned her back to the Founder Nebulis.

The Great Witch who was crucified on the black pillar imitating an enormous sword. It was as if, a single black sword was piercing into the ground.

'Awaken'

'Those spells that were isolated by the black star sword, are released by the white star sword.'

“...Awaken', was it?”

She suddenly turned around. The black pillar upon which the Founder was sleeping, was just like a sword piercing the earth. Was it just a coincidence the the colour of the stone resembled that of Iska's sword?

The sleeping Founder.

The words that Iska spoke when he unleashed that power, 'Awaken.'

And if her mother's words were correct, at the same time that she was fighting Iska, the Founder Nebulis' star spirit reacted, and tried to break the bindings that held her.

“Alice-sama, is something the matter?”

“...! U-uun.”

Stop. Alice erased the picture she had been drawing in her head that was no longer a conjecture, but just wild imagination. For now, she should just forget everything about meeting him that day. Because of him, she had been unable to sleep well recently. She had to stuff her head with thoughts of other matters.

“If I remember right, there was a solo exhibition for art going on right?”

“Alice-sama, it couldn't be that you plan on going to the Neutral City...?”

As Rin heard Alice's mutter, she made an exasperated expression.

“If by any chance, something like the other day were to occur...”

“That was just a coincidence. Just in case, I'll avoid the opera. The other day didn't end up being much in terms of a diversion, so this time I should enjoy my leisure time as much as I can.”

Alice whispered in a way so that her mother behind her could not hear. And while walking up the path in the limestone cave back up to the surface...

“In the Neutral City Ayin, it just so happens that there is an exhibition going on for the impressionist painter Vibran.”

“Vibran?”

“...No, just talking to myself.”

If she mentioned that he was an Imperial court painter, Rin would definitely object. Even if the Empire was her enemy, it was an unmistakable truth that they had a profound influence on the world of fine arts and music. Especially the court painter Vibran's gentle and delicate use of colours—

“Rin, wait here in the palace. It's just in the nearby city, so I'll be fine on my own.”

It was time for her to appreciate paintings to her heart's content during a time of rest. While getting excited at such a prospect, Alice left the sanctuary of the sleeping Founder behind.

“Yes. This should definitely make the hesitation in my heart vanish.”

The next day.

“Se-ri-ous-ly, WHY ARE YOU HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERE!?”

In a plaza of the Neutral City Ayin—

Pointing at the young man that she spotted by coincidence, Alice shrieked with all her might.

“Iska!?”

“...Alice!? Why are you here!?”

At the same time, his movements came to a complete stop as if he were frozen. Furthermore, within his hand, he was holding a ticket to the exact exhibition that Alice was headed towards.

“For even your destination to be the same... Wh-what's the meaning of this!? Why is an Imperial soldier like you coming to the Neutral City so frequently? What happened to your duty of protecting the Empire!?”

“If you're going to say that, Vibran is an Imperial impressionist painter. It isn't so strange for me to come see this. On the other hand, is it fine for you to go see the paintings of an Imperial painter?”

“The fine arts have no borders.”

“Even I came here because it's a painter that I like.”

And like that, the two of them scowled at each other, without even noticing that those passing through the plaza were starting to stare at them.

“To think that Alice would come see paintings from an Imperial painter.”

“I-Isn't it fine!? The city in the evening mist and in the morning glow that Vibran draws, even if I don't paint myself, I like looking at them. Is that bad!?”

“Heeeh.”

“...What is it?”

“I was just thinking that it was the same for me.”

Iska looked down at the ticket in his hand, and then pointed out to the main street going out of the plaza.

“The art gallery is probably down this road. You coming?”

“Yes... Wait, no!”

Even if it was the Neutral City, if the princess of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency was found to be accompanying an Imperial swordsman, it would become a huge uproar.

...Even the Nebulis royal family isn't a monolith.

...If I caused a problem, it would cause problems for my mother the queen.

In the past, the Nebulis royal family had confronted each other over the seat of the queen many times over. Even if they were relatives, to gain the seat of the queen, it was an everyday occurrence to fabricate threats and manipulate information by spreading false rumours. Alice herself had received undeserved scorn a countless number of times already. And that was even from her three sisters.

...In truth, I was troubled because I didn't know where the art gallery is though.

...Uun. But I can't. Show your willpower Alice!

Rin wasn't with her at the moment. If someone saw her together with Iska, it was possible they would spread imaginary rumours of a clandestine meeting between a princess and swordsman from enemy nations.

“You go down that main street. I will... U-use this path here!”

Leaving it to her vigour, Alice pointed down a path that she just happened to spot.

“You're going to use this narrow path?”

“Th-that's right.”

“No matter how you look at it, it's a path that only leads to back-alleys, if you go down there I think you'll end up getting lost though.”

“I won't get lost. Wait and see!”

“Ah, wait, Alice—”

Without waiting for Iska's response, she turned around. She could tell that he was yelling something from behind her, but Alice simply continued walking without listening to him and headed towards a narrow passage that was perpendicular to the main street that Iska pointed to. And several minutes after walking down that path...

“...Where, is this...?”

Alice quickly felt like giving up. It was dark. Even though it was supposed to be the time of day when the sun shined down brightly, rather than a narrow passageway, this was more of a gap between buildings. Because the sunlight was blocked by the buildings, it was as dark as nighttime.

“Not only that, what's with all this dirt. There's garbage all over the place and it hasn't ever been cleaned, and it stinks...”

There were ominous looking substances alongside the walls. What looked to be faded bloodstains was likely the result of a fight between drunkards or something.

“I can't believe it. If I was the princess of this country, I would command all the citizens to do a major cleanup... Geez, just because it's the city of the fine arts, it doesn't mean it's okay to only keep the main street pretty.”

Alice continued to walk down the alley uneasily. She didn't know where she currently was, and she was trusting her intuition completely to guide her to the art gallery. And another ten minutes later...

“...Rin, please save me.”

Alice had gotten completely lost. As a result of going down the constantly splitting dark path filled with garbage, she even lost sight of the path that went back to where she bumped into Iska.

“Even though I asked the way to the art gallery partway...”

She didn't know whether she had asked poorly or whether the other party had misheard her, but she ended up at a completely different plaza where the art gallery was not located.

“Wh-what's with this city...? Make your streets so that they're friendlier to tourists will you...?”

With a fountain to her back, Alice found a bench and plopped down on it. Let alone finding the art gallery, just from having walked through that filthy alleyway, her feet had completely gotten weighed down with fatigue.

Before she noticed, it was already approaching the evening. As a grey curtain descended over the horizon, the tourists that had gathered in the plaza gradually returned to their lodgings.

“...”

The splashes from the fountain reflected the setting sun and glittered with an amber sparkle. Further in the plaza, two children were running about hand in hand having fun.

“...I'm not lonely or anything...”

Alice spoke to herself in a worn out voice.

“If I return to the castle, Rin will be there, even if I spend just one day like today...”

“Alice?”

And just at that time, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Just as I thought, it's Alice.”

“Eh? Who would you... Or not, Iska!?”

As she saw the figure of the young man standing behind her, Alice screamed and she jumped to her feet. Because she raised her voice so suddenly, the shock of it all made her heartbeat speed up to the point where it hurt.

“Why are you here? What happened to the art gallery?”

“I went to see it briefly. But because I didn't see Alice there, I thought maybe you ended up getting lost or something. That narrow passageway you walked down went in the opposite direction of the art gallery after all.”

“Uu...”

Seeing that he guessed correctly, she had no way of objecting.

“Want me to guide you?”

“Eh?”

“It's already evening. The art gallery will close soon if you don't hurry.”

Iska asked her in a casual tone.

“B-but, like I thought, I can't. We're enemies aren't we!? I'm a princess from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, and you're a swordsman from the Empire aren't you!?”

“You're a princess?”

“Ah...”

Having revealed her own identity, Alice stiffened up on the spot. She did remember naming herself as one who had the right to inherit the throne, but she never informed him of her exact social status. And just now, she let on to the fact that she was the daughter of the current queen, Nebulis VIII.

“Well, I expected that.”

“...Right!? There's no need to hide it from you after all this time.”

Alice took off the hat that she was wearing down over her eyes, and her face was revealed by the evening sun.

“We are enemies, it's obvious that we can't go to something like an art gallery together.”

“We're enemies, but...”

With a serious look, Iska tilted his head to the side.

“The fine arts have no borders. Wasn't Alice the one to say that?”

“...”

Alice instinctively kept quiet. To forget all quarrels and enjoy the arts. That was the ideal of the Neutral City. And what Alice came to see, was the paintings of an Imperial court painter. There wasn't a single thing that was strange or coincidentally being in the presence of tourists from the Empire if she went there.

“...Yes. I did say that didn't I.”

Alice put the hat in her hand back on her head. Not in a way to cover her face, but lightly so it just sat atop her head.

“Please lead the way.”

“Then come this way.”

Alice followed after Iska as he began walking.

Aah, in the end I have to walk again...

Whether or not he sensed Alice thinking that, Iska's feet came to a stop.

“We're here.”

“Um, could it be...”

Vibran Exhibition—as Iska pointed out to a billboard which stated this, the two of them looked back at the plaza behind them.

“The plaza I got lost in, was actually right behind the art gallery?”

“Yup. It's because it was the plaza right behind the art gallery that I found Alice. Setting that aside, let's hurry. There's only thirty minutes until it closes.”

Iska looked up at the clock put up at the entrance.

“It may be difficult to get a look at everything. Is there something that Alice wanted to see?”

“U-umm... Um... Then 'The Twilight Coloured City' would be good. It's the landscape painting made from the roof of a tall chapel over the Imperial capital during the winter as the day was coming to an end!”

“Then it's this way.”

Iska quickly headed towards the queue of people coming out from the building. In opposition to the flow of tourists they were passing, only herself and Iska were headed deeper into the art gallery.

“It's this right? The painting that Alice wanted to see.”

Iska's feet came to a stop. As the young man turned around, the painting that Alice had seen many times over since she was a child in a photo book came into sight. The genuine article that was many times the size of the one she had seen in the photo book that is.

“...Ah...”

Her voice poured out from the depths of her throat. This was not to express her thoughts, but simply an impulse born from overflowing emotions.

“...I, wanted to see this.”

Alice drew one step closer to the large canvas which was just as tall as she was, and then she drew another step closer. A city covered in snow. A single painting which showed that spectacle as a veil of darkness descended over it. It was not vividly coloured, but used a grey tone to bleakly colour itself. However, the warm lights that came from the windows of the buildings was overflowing.

—Neither cold nor warm.

Ever since she was a child, she was fascinated by that marvellous scene. Even though it was a city filled with her hateful enemies. She couldn't help but feel like all her anger was simply silenced by its power.

“Iska.”

“What is it?”

“Why, do you like this painter?”

“—This.”

Right next to her, at just about the same height, he was looking at the canvas right before them. And he pointed at a point on the canvas.

“The colours are slightly piled up here.”

“What about it?”

“It may just be my imagination, but when he used the knife to paint the colours here, I feel like just for an instant, he rethought the way he was going to paint it. The moment he thought of the scene that he wanted to paint on the canvas, he thought of a better way of doing it. And right there, he stopped his hand.”

“...Yes.”

“And here too. A completely different colour was repainted over. The scenery he wanted to paint changed within his head. With a stronger colour, with more passion, like that.”

As the footsteps of the other tourists leaving rang through the air, Alice could only hear the voice beside her.

“Alice may also be aware of this, but the painter known as Vibran only ever painted landscapes of cities, roads and harbours. Not only that, not a single person would be in his paintings. The main subject of his paintings was always inorganic, and the colour usage was gloomy, but—”

“It's amazingly passionate?”

“Yeah. It's very calm, but he was likely an extremely passionate person on the inside. Just from looking at his paintings, the personality of the painter is passed down, that's probably, what I like about him.”

“I get it. I also—”

As she was about to speak, the princess of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency suddenly noticed. She wasn't looking at the painting, but at the profile of the face next to her.

She had been taught of the foundations of the painting by an artist from the Imperial Household Agency before, but Alice was unable to understand that painter's feelings. It was likely because it was about a painter from the Empire. The artist thought that they were better as an artist—so that's all they spoke about.

It was the first time that she was being told about a painting that she liked with one's utmost effort.

“Alice, what's wrong?”

“...It's nothing.”

Alice only quietly replied as such. She had to pretend to be composed—

Because she had a feeling that if she didn't, something inside her would change.



In the evening.

As the last visitors within the building at the time of closing, Alice and Iska left the art gallery behind. In the plaza behind the art gallery, in front of the bench that Alice had sat down on after getting lost, Alice threw over a glass bottle to Iska.

“...Here. This is to thank you for guiding me. Your throat must be parched from talking all this time too.”

“There's no need to thank me.”

Iska caught the glass bottle filled with fruit juice in midair. Turning towards him, Alice lifted up the fruit juice that she had bought for herself.

“I don't like making any debts. Especially to you.”

“It wasn't anything major. Even I can at least pay for... Hm?”

As Iska searched his pockets, he stopped moving.

“What's wrong?”

“...I may have, forgotten my money.”

“You forgot your money?”

“No, um... My head was fully occupied with not forgetting the ticket for the art gallery, so...”

“Then how did you get here all the way from the Empire?”

“I have a book of tickets for the regular bus.”

“So, you forgot your money because you didn't need it.”

The young man apologetically nodded silently. While looking at the glass bottle of juice in his hand and at Alice, he opened his mouth in a fluster.

“Ah, but the price of this juice is...”

“You dummy.”

Alice made a bittersweet smile. No matter how small it was, this was the first time Alice naturally smiled towards an Imperial soldier.

“I'm saying that I handed it to you as a gift, don't worry about it.”

The fountain was dyed by the evening sun. Without feeling awkward about sitting on the same bench, the two of them sat down near the edge of the fountain.

“...Now that I think about it.”

While holding the empty bottle in her hand, Alice looked at the young man beside her.

“How old are you?”

"I'm sixteen. This year I'll be seventeen."

"...Oh? Then I'm one year older."

She was wondering if they were about the same age. She had a feeling that they were, but she found it slightly strange that he was younger than her.

"So you're younger than me. Since I am the older one, it is fine for you to show some respect to me you know?"

"I don't want to be told that by someone older who also got lost."

"Y-you're wrong! I'm telling you that I was just sightseeing in the Neutral City!"

A frivolous conversation. About painters they liked other than Vibran. A little more on the topic of pasta that came up before. And while they talked of such things, without one or the other bringing an end to the conversation—

She dozed off.

By the time Alice noticed that she had fallen asleep for an instant, the evening sun was just about to vanish into the horizon.

"Wh-wh-what am I...!?"

Even if she was having troubles sleeping lately, falling asleep where an Imperial swordsman could see her was far too foolish. And as she reflexively looked to her side.

"...Iska?"

Sitting near the edge of the fountain, the young man's body was swaying lightly as he dozed off. His eyes were shut and she could hear the quiet breath of him sleeping.

"Are you asleep?"

He was likely just pretending. And as Alice leaned in to confirm...

"..."

The sleeping young man slumped down against her, as if he was burying his face in

her chest.

“Kya!?”

Her body reflexively stiffened up.

“Wh-what are you doing!?”

“...”

“...Geez, how can you sleep so soundly? Aren't you just a child...? Though I also dozed off just a little.”

The young man was sleeping far too defencelessly. It may have been, that just like her, he was unable to get any sleep lately. While listening to him quietly breathe in his sleep, she had that feeling.



“We're enemies you know? Even if this is the Neutral City, don't you think you're far too defenceless? If I... If I... felt like it, with how you are now, with a single strike...”

There was no reply. Seeing that figure full of openings, Alice looked up at the sky and let out a deep sigh.

“Dummy. If you fall asleep in a place like this, you'll catch a cold.”

Alice carefully held Iska in her arm and laid him down flat. And once more confirming that he was asleep...

“Excuse me.”

Alice hailed a passenger cab that was travelling down the road in front of her.

“Could you please carry this one over to the Empire? Up to the Imperial capital's gate is fine.”

“Oioi.”

From the other side of the window, the driver was plainly frowning.

“That's a bit of a problem little lady. At this time? No matter how fast you go, it'll take six hours to get to Imperial territory. The Imperial capital's gates only opens at dawn too. How much do you think it'll cost you? Not only is it super long distance, its outside of regular hours, it'll be stupidly expensive you know?”

“I will pay the fare in advance.”

“Haa? Pay in advance you say, do you know how much it'll—”

“Here you are.”

Before he could finish speaking, Alice threw over a bundle of paper bills from her bag towards the driver. They were bills that were globally used in all countries. Let alone the fare for a cab, it was probably enough to buy the whole vehicle.

“Please use the change however you like.”

“...Thank you for your patronage.”

“Please do handle him carefully.”

“Certainly!”

Running over to the fountain at full speed, the driver carried Iska and laid him down in the passenger seat. Getting in the driver's seat, the passenger cab quickly headed towards the city's exit.

“Do not misunderstand. This is just thanks for guiding me to the art gallery. That's all it is.”

Seeing him off until she could no longer see the car, Alice turned her back to the plaza, and decided to return home.

...But why?

...Up until today, I never felt assaulted by such drowsiness.

Ever since the day she fought against Iska in the Nelka forest, all the way until now. Iska's face was burned into her mind and she wasn't able to get a wink of sleep. Rin had said that she was unable to relieve the tension she felt from the fight yet, but if that was the case, there was no way she could doze off when the person in question was right next to her.

“Geez, what's going on!?”

Rather than disappearing, the haziness in her head just grew thicker, as Alice kicked a pebble on the side of the road as hard as she could.

Chapter 4

The Threshold Between Duty and Sentiment

1

Within Sector 3 of the Imperial Capital.

“Uuuuuuuuuu.....”

On the second floor of the base, within the strategic planning room used for squads.

Within the perfectly sound proof room, before the mountain of documents sitting on the table before her, the petite blue haired female captain let out a groan. Sitting next to her, Iska handed over a juice bottle.

“Captain Mismis. Here, I bought the carbonated juice that you like.”

“Yay! It's ginger ale!”

Mismis' expression brightened up in an instant. As fast as a carnivore pouncing on its prey, she grabbed the bottle with both her hands.

“Come on, Nene and Jhin too, let's take a little break.”

“How unusual.”

“Eh?”

“That you bought juice in a glass bottle instead of a can.”

Sitting in a chair across the table, Jhin folded his arms and pointed a puzzled gaze at Iska.

“Did they run out of canned juice?”

“No, I wasn't really paying any attention to that. I just kind of... Felt like it.”

Until Jhin pointed it out, not even Iska himself realized it. A glass bottle for juice, that was—

'Here. This is to thank you for guiding me. Your throat must be parched from talking all this time too'

“...Now that I think about it, it's cause I was given juice in a bottle.”

“Given? By who?”

“Ah, no no no! That's not it, not it at all. It's just that I went to buy some, and that's what the shopkeeper gave me. Back when I went to the Neutral City that is.”

Seeing Jhin knit his brows, Iska shook his head in a fluster. He couldn't possibly say that it was given to him by the Ice Witch of Calamity, and even if he did, it was obvious that it would just make things more confusing.

...Now that I think of it, how did I get back?

...Before I realized it, I was in a passenger cab and had already arrived at the Imperial capital.

The driver said the fare was paid for in advance. Just being told that, Iska couldn't grasp the situation right away. Even if he boarded a passenger cab in a daze, there was no way he could pay the fare since he had forgotten his wallet. In that case, the one who paid for the fare beforehand was...

“Aah this is useless!”

Mismis jumped out of her seat with a thud.

“There's too much to memorize! What's with this? All we know about the special mission we're going under Lishia-chan's command for is that we meet up next week, and begin training for it next month right? Then why are there so many documents about it beforehand...?”

The mountain of documents on the table measured about one metre high. Not only that, there was more than just that. Behind the mountain, there was a whole other mountain range of the same size just waiting for them.

“Uuu. Saying that there's no guarantee that we'll come back alive if we don't cram the entire mission's contents into our heads, it's too much.”

“Though she also said that even if you memorize it, there's no guarantee that you'll come back alive right~.”

“Nene-chan, I don't need that kind of comment!”

Mismis plopped back down into her chair. And now, she had her head against the table.

“After getting worn out by lectures, it's physical training on the grounds. Once the body is tired from training, it's studying documents. After getting worn out by studying, it's back to training... She won't even tell us what kind of mission it is, there's no end to the anxiety as to what we're going to do huh.”

“I can at least predict that it won't be a worthwhile mission though.”

Saying that, Jhin went back to reading through the mountain of documents at a terrifying pace.

“Now that I think about it, Iska—”

“Hi there~. Mismis, where are you right now?”

A broadcast interrupted Jhin from speaking. The voice they heard was Lishia's. It was likely a communication from the central base where her operations room was.

“How's it going? Is Jhin-jhin tired of all your complaining at having to memorize all those documents yet?”

“*gulp*...”

“On top of that, you didn't ask Iska-chi to go buy you juice did you? You can't do that, it's a breach of rules for an officer to give commands to their subordinates unrelated to their duties. Aah, but if there's any ginger ale left then I'd also like one though~.”

“You're watching aren't you!? Come on, show yourself!”

The captain looked around frantically in the room where there was no way surveillance cameras would be put in place.

“Anywho, setting that aside. Iska-chi, is it fine to ask you to run a little errand somewhere?”

“To Lishia-san's position?”

“Nope, to the Imperial Diet.”

The fifth seat of the Holy Apostles did not hide her bitterness.

“You may be about to forget, but Iska-chi was a prisoner until a few days ago. And you were released thanks to who again?”

“...I remember.”

The Eight Grand Apostles. As the ultimate authority at the summit of the Imperial Diet, they were the ones who held real power over the entire Empire in place of the Emperor.

“That written report about the time you went to the Nelka forest, it seems they finished reading it over. And so, they called for a meeting.”

“...It couldn't be, they're done with Iska-nii and throwing him back in!?”

“There there, calm down Nene-tan. I just heard about it myself.”

Nene stared at Iska with a worried look. And in contrast, Lishia's voice that rang out through the room was a carefree one mixed in with a yawn.

“Anyways, go and see. The meeting's at four in the afternoon at the usual place.”

“Another suspicious chat huh?”

Jhin spoke while leaning back on his chair.

“There's no way the Eight Grand Apostles have anything good to talk about. At any rate, it's those guys that Master called the shadiest of them all. It wouldn't be weird no matter what ended up happening.”

“...That's how it goes.”

The Man of Black Steel Crosswell — the man known as the strongest swordsman of the Empire, the one he considered his most detested opponent, was not the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, nor was it the star mages. He never relaxed his guard around the Eight Grand Apostles. That master who served as the personal escort of the Emperor, said that of the ultimate authority in the Empire.

“In any case, I'm off.”

“Iska-kun! If something happens, I'll come running over as a captain okay!?”

Mismis yelled out in a reliable and serious tone. Nodding back at the captain making a face like a mother looking out for her child, Iska left the room behind.



The Imperial Diet.

Also known as 'The Unseen Will.'

The source of that second name, was because the diet building did not appear on any map. Its location was verbally passed down from a superior to their subordinate. It was absolutely never written down. It was to the point where Iska was first informed of it only when he first rose to the status of a Holy Apostle.

“Five thousand metres under the Imperial Capital huh...”

The temperature, was truly one hundred and fifty degrees.

In the abyss of the planet where underground microbes could narrowly survive. Only by using an enormous elevator that was located in the central base, could one reach the 'Unseen Will.'

...For the sake of hiding from the eyes of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.

...How meticulous.

Even if the entire Empire was burned to the ground by star mages from Nebulis, they themselves would be completely unscathed. It was a place where one felt like they could hear the sneers of the Eight Grand Apostles.

“We've kept you waiting.”

Iska looked up directly in front of him at the monitor on the wall as it turned on, and the faint image of eight men and woman came into sight. The Eight Grand Apostles. While being the eight people who had the Empire under their thumb, only their silhouettes were shown on that monitor.

“Now then, Successor of Black Steel Iska. We have confirmed the contents of your report.”

“To have fought with the Ice Witch of Calamity and repel her. As expected, you have outstanding talent.”

A tone with a sense of joy. Seeing that the Eight Grand Apostles were in good humour, Iska secretly felt a sense of relief. It was a fact that he was tense from having been called here by those of superior status, but the Eight Grand Apostles were also eerie in that he never knew what they were thinking.

“However, I was unable to protect the power reactor.”

“The duty given to you was to keep the Ice Witch of Calamity in check, not to protect the power reactor.”

“The Empire has a means of opposing the Ice Witch of Calamity. Just from having been able to validate that, you have made sufficient military gains. It is enough to consider your reinstatement into the Holy Apostles.”

Holy Apostles — hearing this spoken by the Eight Grand Apostles, Iska reflexively raised his face.

It was far too hasty. The Empire had a doctrine of skill supremacy. There were cases where a regular soldier with outstanding talent would leap over the position of an officer... But, even taking that into consideration, was there really a case where someone like Iska who was imprisoned for treason against the state to be appointed to the Holy Apostles so quickly?

“We understand your feelings of wanting peace. As a Holy Apostle, you would be able to hold an audience with his Excellency the Emperor. However, to rise to that status, there is naturally a need for you to silence the other Holy Apostle candidates. Especially since there are none who do not know of your criminal record.”

A deep laughter was passed through the monitor. A man in the prime of his life, an old man, and a young woman's voice could be heard.

“And so, we will present you with the conditions for your reinstatement into the Holy Apostles. That is—”

“The capture of the Ice Witch of Calamity.”

“—! To capture, Al—”

As Iska was about to reflexively say Alice's name, he just narrowly managed to stop. Even he did not know why he kept her name secret on the spur of the moment. Somewhat unconsciously, he just hated notifying the Eight Grand Apostles of the name Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX. He understood that they were enemies. But, could he really do it?

...With my hands.

...To hand Alice over to military headquarters... That's...

'How old are you?'

‘...Oh? Then I'm one year older.’

A carefree smile. The girl who was his enemy showed for an instant that her heart had thawed. That memory, brightened his cynical mind for just an instant.

“There is no time limit. However, do make haste. If you wish to protect the Empire that is.”

“Make haste? What does that mean?”

The Eight Grand Apostles spoke like they were predicting a bleak future. As a threat against Iska, the scale of the way they put it was far too large.

“I wonder if you have heard of this legend? 'The Great Witch Nebulis is still alive.'”

“If it is about that, then I heard it many times when I was a child.”

It was a simple ghost story that anyone who lived in the Empire knew about. However,

it wasn't ever something to seriously consider. For example, it was similar to the thought that 'The world will end in one more year.'

"But is there something about..."

"Fumu, so it seems you do not know."

A somewhat delighted laugh rang out.

"The one who spread that legend throughout the Empire, was none other than your Master."

"Master!?"

"We believe it to be the truth."

"That man, the 'Man of Black Steel,' kept secrets from us. We thought that there was no way that you would not know as his successor, but I see we were mistaken... Then it is fine."

"Forget that we spoke of this."

They had already lost interest in Iska as a single soldier. The tone of the Eight Grand Apostles quickly became cold and dry.

"All you have to do is chase after the Ice Witch of Calamity. Just with that, you will be reinstated into the Holy Apostles. That is of course, as long as you never perform a jailbreak like you did before."

"We have high expectations of you."

"Now go. It is nothing, Lishia Ean Empire will pass you your next mission. All you need to do is follow her instructions."

"..."

A silent bow. While unable to say anything, Iska turned his back to the Eight Grand Apostles.

Half asleep and half awake.

As the night wore on—

Both his vision and thoughts were dim, and he felt like he was caught in an illusion. After returning to the base where Captain Mismis, Jhin and Nene were waiting for him, even as the four of them quietly continued to go through the documents in the strategy room, not a single bit of information from those documents entered Iska's mind. He didn't remember anything from the time he returned to the barracks from the base either. By the time he realized it, he was sitting in his room with the lights out, and Iska was simply pondering as the night wore on.

'Why, do you like this painter?'

Alice was an enemy.

She was a pure blood direct descendant of the Great Witch Nebulis who revolted against the Empire, the daughter of the current queen of Nebulis, and the Ice Witch of Calamity which posed a major threat to the Empire. There was likely no better example of a perfectly clear enemy.

Also, she was likely the most formidable enemy he had ever faced. If he were to capture her, the balance between the nations would likely crumble in an instant. If he used Alice as a hostage, the Imperial Household Agency would have no choice but to comply with peace talks. In that sense, the Eight Grand Apostles' aim was unmistakably on point. However...

“...It may be wrong.”

Looking up at the starlight coming through his window, Iska muttered to himself.

“Can we not get along without peace talks or hostages?”

Unless the witch was captured, peace talks would not occur. Iska himself thought this just until recently. Because he believed this, he fought against the star spirit corps from Nebulis, and took action to battle the pure blood witch in order to capture her.

...But that's wrong.

...Even without peace talks, Alice smiled.

Iska and Alice. Even if one were to say they weren't on good terms, they were able to pass time gently in the Neutral City. By nature, weren't the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency able to do the same? Without requiring any peace talks, wasn't it possible to find a path that didn't involve conflict?

“—”

Stretching out one leg, Iska sat up. While resting one hand on his knee, Iska picked up a communication device with his other hand. The communication light flickered on and off, and Iska waited quietly for the other side to pick up.

“F-fwaaaa... I-Iska-kun... What's... Up... Munya... So late at night?”

“Sorry for contacting you so late at night, Captain.”

Mismis spoke in a dazed voice. And after waiting for her to fully wake up...

“Okay, Iska-kun. It's alright now.”

“I'm sorry about dropping it on you so suddenly, but please excuse me from tomorrow's training.”

“Heh? Wh-what's wrong!?”

From the other side of the communication device, he could hear the fired up voice of his surprised female captain.

“By take a rest from training, are you not feeling well? Or maybe you're dissatisfied in my leadership...? S-sorry Iska-kun, I'm such a useless captain...”

“That's not it, that's not it at all.”

“Ha!? It couldn't be because I snuck away on my own to get barbecue? Sorry Iska-kun, I didn't know you wanted to get meat that much.”

“I'm telling you that's not it!?”

Iska cleared his throat with a cough. And while feeling like the hand holding the

receiver was stiffening, Iska mustered his strength as he spoke.

"I have something to do, in the Neutral City."

"The Neutral City? Eh. But you just used Lishia-chan's ticket to the art exhibition right? And before that it was the opera ticket I gave you."

"It's not like I have something to go see there. It's just, there's someone I want to meet and talk to."

"That is?"

"It's, um, probably going to end up being a very troublesome conversation and take quite a bit of time... And it may end up in a fight though."

Making a bitter smile, Iska spoke in a self deprecating tone.

"I plan on leaving early in the morning, but because of the distance from the Imperial Capital, it would take about ten hours just for the round trip. I don't know when I'll be able to get back."

"So you want to take a break from training."

"Yes."

The next day, the four of them were going to train. If Iska was the only one skipping out, the schedule for the day had to be reworked. Let alone Mismis, it would likely also cause problems for Jhin and Nene.

"Is it important?"

"...Yes. Please allow me to go"

The captain on the other side of the line remained silent. And after waiting for nearly a minute, a grand sigh came through.

"It can't be helped. Iska-kun is going so far for it after all."

"Thank you very much."

“But I have one condition. I'll be going with you tomorrow.”

“Eh?”

Why would she? With a moment of silence between them as Iska hesitated to ask her motives, the one to speak up first was Mismis.

“Try looking in a mirror.”

“A mirror?”

“Iska-kun, right now you're making a cold expression right?”

“...”

Just from that phrase, Iska's half open eyes shot open in surprise.

“See? Just like I thought. It's being passed through your breathing you know?”

Mismis' laughter came through the line.

“Your voice was stiff from the very beginning after all. Besides, you're contacting me so late in the night. You've been brooding over it quite a lot right?”

“...I have nothing to say against that.”

Putting his hand to his brow, Iska took a deep breath. Normally, Mismis couldn't be described as quick-witted by any standard, and her memory was definitely poor. However, only her ability to perceive changes in emotions in her subordinates was terrifyingly sharp.

“You got me there. As expected of our captain.”

“Heheheeh. Well yeah. But just like I said, I'm against Iska-kun going on your own. I mean, the way you're talking is different from normal. As a captain, I can't approve of letting a subordinate go and do something on their own in that kind of condition right?”

“...Understood.”

Iska nodded. No matter how things turned out, there was a need to eventually report it anyways. Since he had to talk with her about it anyways, even if she didn't know his exact intentions, having his superior come along with him would likely be fine.

“Captain Mismis, please do accompany me.”

“Roger that! By the way, what'll you be wearing? If we're going as civilians I need to quickly pick out clothes!”

“It'll be fine in our normal combat garments.”

They were combatants from the Empire. That was a fact that was indispensable to what he wanted to accomplish the next day.

“Then tomorrow, we'll meet in front of the garage at six in the morning.”

Cutting off the connection, with his consciousness far more sobered up than he thought possible, Iska continued to look up at the Imperial capital's night sky through his window.

“Alice-sama.”

In a corridor overflowing with light, Alice was called out while returning to her private quarters from the royal palace's large public bath, and turned around.

“Rin, where were you? I thought we were going to get in the bath together?”

“...”

“Rin?”

The young attendant remained silent with her mouth shut tight as she stared at Alice with her amber eyes. There wasn't a clear sense of anger or anxiety in her gaze, what was being conveyed was a different emotion — something like a deep seated fear.

“I have something to speak of with you.”

“What is it?”

The attendant then replied with a suppressed tone.

“We have finished collecting information on the swordsman from the Empire.”

“About Iska?”

It was about the lineage that she was concerned about from the beginning.

...Though I met him twice in the Neutral City.

...It's not like I could have asked him directly.

He likely rivalled even the Holy Apostles who were the greatest fighting force of the Empire. However, he was a regular soldier who was not even an officer, moreover, when he was away from the battlefield, the ferocity he had as a swordsman seemed like a lie. She could only see him as a gentle and normal young man.

“Let's hear it.”

“Yes. It is just, in this passage...”

“Of course, let's go to my room.”

Within the passageway, they didn't know if anybody would come across them. Especially because both Rin and Alice kept it secret from even the queen that they encountered Iska in the Neutral City Ayin, it would be bad if anybody heard them speak of it.

“However, it really took some time huh?”

In Alice's private quarters, the 'Jewel Case Bell,' Alice spoke to Rin while shutting the door firmly.

“After asking you, it would be one thing if it was information on the Holy Apostles, but I thought our spies would be able to gather information on the lineage of a regular soldier given just a few days.”

She also didn't think that she would meet the person in question twice during that period. His favourite food was pasta. His hobbies included appreciation of opera and paintings. She learned of such information that their spies would be unable to uncover so naturally.

...Also his sleeping face was quite cute.

...Wait, what am I thinking about!? This is the time to be dealing with it seriously!

“Let me hear the report.”

Pushing away her internal conflict, Alice nodded towards Rin.

“...Just who is he?”

“A Holy Apostle.”

With just those words, her attendant informed her of his identity before continuing.

“Not only that, it seems that he was the youngest to ever attain the status of a Holy Apostle in all history. There is no mistaking that he bears influence as one of the most prominent swordsmen in the Empire.”

“A Holy Apostle!? Wait a minute Rin, isn't that strange?”

Altogether, the Holy Apostles of the Empire were eleven people. Since each and everyone of them posed enough danger to wipe out an entire star spirit corps, for the past several decades, the Imperial Household Agency concentrated its efforts on gathering intelligence about them. Alice herself had information about all eleven Holy Apostles drilled into her head.

“I've never heard of a Holy Apostle named Iska...”

“That is because there was never a recorded battle of him with a star spirit corps. After being promoted, without once being sent to the front line, he had his status stripped from him and was imprisoned.”

“Imprisoned?”

Alice knit her brows. Why would someone with the outstanding talent to rise to the position of a Holy Apostle need to be imprisoned?

“What were the circumstances?”

“...I do not know quite how to express it.”

With an unusually weak expression, Rin held out a faded magazine from the Empire.

'The youngest Holy Apostle in history.'

'Arrested for the crime of treason against the state by preparing the prison break of a witch. The judgment of lifelong imprisonment has been passed down.'

...Sentenced to life imprisonment.

...But wait, what is this about a witch's prison break?

The magazine's listed date was about one year ago.

“Due to breaking out a witch that was captured within Imperial territory, in other words, for letting a star mage go, he was stripped of his status as a Holy Apostle. Just in case, I looked at other sources of information, but the contents of this magazine do not seem to be a mistake.”

“He became a Holy Apostle but was immediately stripped of it. Is that why I don't know about it?”

“It is not just Alice-sama. The spies who discovered it were also surprised.”

However — as Rin said that, she began fidgeting with the hair that came down on both sides of her face. It was a habit of hers. Whenever she was deep in thought, she would unconsciously fidget with her hair.

“Just as Alice-sama knows, he was acquitted.”

“I know that well.”

“He was acquitted eleven days ago. It was just the day before Alice-sama fought with that swordsman in the Nelka forest.”

Iska was acquitted for the purpose of fighting the Ice Witch of Calamity. Certainly, with his level of strength, she could agree with the Empire's decision that he could challenge a pure blood witch all on his own.

“But, the more I think about it the less sense it makes.”

Alice looked down at the magazine in her hands.

“Setting aside the time in the Neutral City, when we met him in the forest, Iska was looking to fight with me. Rin was also asked 'Are you the Ice Witch of Calamity' right?”

“Yes, though it is a failure I do not wish to recall...”

Perhaps because she remembered that she had started the attack, but had the tables turned on her, Rin spoke in a hazy tone.

“However it is just as you say. That swordsman known as Iska definitely had the will to fight against the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency. Rather, I feel that his goal was actually to fight against the Ice Witch of Calamity — against Alice-sama.”

“Then, I wonder why he released one of our comrades from jail one year ago?”

She couldn't help but feel there was a contradiction. On one hand he was taking actions to free a witch, on the other he challenged Alice and Rin with the intent of capturing

them.

...Even though to the Empire, we are all just witches?

...What's different about the witch that he released?

“About the incident of the witch's jailbreak, we believe that it may be a trap to try and deceive us.”

“Rin, look into the star mage who was broken out one year ago by him.”

“I have already made arrangements for that. It will take another few days though.”

“You work fast. As expected.”

Nodding with satisfaction, Alice sat down on a corner of her bed.

—That was enough for the day. It was about time to sleep.

Having been Alice's servant for ten years, this was a naturally born signal to Rin. When she looked at the teacups in the cupboard, it was teatime. When Rin pinched her apron, it meant she had other business to attend to. There was that kind of tacit understanding between them. And so, Rin left the room without a word. Making sure that the footsteps from the hallway had gotten far away, Alice stretched her arms out to her pillow.

“She didn't notice right...?”

A handkerchief. It was the one she borrowed from him in the Neutral City Ayin. She had told Rin that she already burned it away. When Rin told her it belonged to someone from the Empire, so she would get rid of it, Alice had replied as such, but in truth, she had hidden it under her pillow.

“...I can get rid of it at any time after all.”

Alice was aware that she was just making an excuse. But, not yet. She had yet to ask of Iska's true feelings.

'The fine arts have no borders. Isn't Alice the one who said that?'

...I don't get it.

He lent her his handkerchief to wipe away her tears. He guided her to the art gallery, and taught her about that painting with all his heart. Was that all like Rin was saying, a trap just to deceive his enemy? Was everything he showed her in the Neutral City just an act? It wasn't too late to deal with the handkerchief after verifying all that.

"You seem to be quite concerned with that Imperial soldier I see."

"Mother!?"

The door opened without even a knock. Despite being late at night, her mother appeared wearing her usual royal garments. Having finished her official duties, she may have been just on her way back to her own room.

"Wh-why are you here?"

Alice hid the handkerchief behind her in a hurry.

"I heard that you commanded Rin to investigate an enemy soldier. However, I have talked of this with our intelligence agency. Alice, it is nothing for you to read into."

"..."

"...Or is it that you have another reason to be so concerned?"

"No, I overreached myself."

It seemed that she wasn't seen meeting with Iska in the Neutral City. Judging that from the way her mother was speaking, Alice secretly let out a sigh of relief.

"But as an observation of the enemy's plan at large..."

"I do understand that you have concerns of your own regarding that. However, if you get involved in it too much, your sisters will glare at you."

Alice's older sister Ellitia, and her younger sister Cybelle. Alice was well aware that both were star mages worthy of the name pure blood, and both were talented women who were cornerstones to the politics of the Imperial Household Agency. And the fact that they competed for the throne...

The eyes of her sisters stretched around the entire palace, and the only time Alice felt at ease was when she was within her own room together with Rin.

“And one more thing. It seems that you are collecting paintings from an Imperial artist again?”

Her mother looked up at the photo books lined up on the top shelf of the bookshelf against the wall with an exasperated gaze. Despite not being in circulation in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, it was a collection that Alice took pains to build up little by little.

“The Empire is our enemy.”

Alice had heard these words from her mother a countless number of times.

“Calling us witches and warlocks, it is the den of those who abhor and persecute us. The atrocious witch hunts in the past performed by the Empire was the embodiment of that. Just how many star mages fell victim to them? It is the dearest wish of all star mages to defeat the Empire and force them to yield.”

“...”

“The same applies to art from the Empire. I'm sure you know of the many paintings of 'witch hunts' and 'witch trials' painted by artists from the Empire. They are also pawns of the Empire. They are the same ones as those in your photo books.”

“...Yes, mother.”

“That is all I had to inform you of. I've taken up your time at such a late hour haven't I.”

Her mother left her room. And once more, all alone in her room, Alice remained stock still where she was.

...Is it really as mother says?

...Is every single citizen within Imperial territory unforgivable without exception?

'Just, who are you?'

'On top of getting all the way to the Empire's base on your own, you broke through the defences and destroyed the power reactor... It is not something the average star mage can do.'

Iska was different. When he stood before her in the Nelka forest, he chose to call her not by the derogatory name of witch, but a 'star mage.' On the other hand, her mother declared that all citizens of the Empire were savages who called them witches and warlocks. Just which one was discriminating against the other...?

Alice brought the handkerchief she was hiding behind her back to her knees. And after staring at it like she could pierce a hole through it...

"Okay, I've decided!"

Taking in a deep breath, Alice leaped out of her room. And walking down the quiet nighttime hallway with long strides, she stopped in front of the next room over.

"Rin! Rin are you awake!?"

Alice slammed open the door with a thud.

"Get ready to leave."

"Wh-why so suddenly!?"

Rin turned around while holding her nightcap and wearing her pajamas. She currently had her braided hair let loose straight down, and looked slightly more mature than she usually did.

"We're leaving the palace first thing in the morning. We're going to the Neutral City, so make the preparations."

"Again!?"

Rin raised her voice almost to the point of a scream.

"But, if we were to encounter that swordsman known as Iska...!"

"We're going so that we encounter him."

“...What?”

“I want to confirm it for myself. His true feelings.”

Biting down on her lower lip, Alice turned her back to her attendant.

“That's why, this will definitely be the last time.”

A path covered in a heat haze.

At a time when the sun on the horizon was rising up to the sky—

It was a wasteland where any and all moisture had evaporated, leaving behind spiderweb like fissures in the ground, and only a few weeds could be seen sprouting out here and there.

“The Neutral City Ayin huh. It's been quite a long time since I've come this way by car.”

A buggy was racing across the wasteland. Mismis was gripping the wheel as she squinted at the dazzling sunlight.

“I informed Jhin-kun and Nene-chan that the two of them can do independent training today.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Un. But the weather is nice huh~. It's a perfectly clear sky with no clouds.”

The wind blew over the car with no roof. Letting her hair loose in the wind, the female captain stepped on the accelerator.

“And so Iska-kun, isn't it about time you tell me who you're planning to meet today?”

“Who do you think it is?”

“Some big shot from the Empire? Maybe it's a Holy Apostle other than Lishia-chan? Iska-kun, you were just called in by the Eight Grand Apostles the other day right? Maybe it's a secret talk outside the Empire?”

“I'm, not that amazing a person.”

The shadow of the Neutral City Ayin could be seen coming over the horizon. While recalling the streets of the famous capital of opera and the arts, Iska showed his captain a bitter smile.

“I don't have any other acquaintances in the Holy Apostles. I was demoted right away after all.”

“There's rumours that those eleven people are super competitive too right...? Hmmm? But if that's the case, I can't seem to figure out who you made an appointment with today even more.”

“I didn't, make an appointment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just thought 'they would come,' one way or another. I never believed in things like destiny or fate before, but... But... I feel like I'll probably meet them again.”

“Meaning?”

“I won't know until I go and see.”

As Mismis was still making an extremely perplexed expression, Iska shrugged his shoulders. The Neutral City Ayin could now be clearly seen through the windshield of the car.

“By the way, Captain, do you see something flying in the sky?”

A black shadow was flying across the clear blue sky. From their perspective, it was coming from the northeast — from the same direction as the sun, approaching the Neutral City Ayin.

“...It's a bird. Captain, it's a really big bird.”

It was a strange bird that looked like it flew right out of the world of legends. The shape of its body appeared to be an eagle, but its long snake-like tail fluttered in the wind. Its feathers were a mix of white and blue in a marble pattern. It was like a cloud hanging in the blue sky. It was like the scenery was imprinted on the bird. Not only that, it was large. They were able to perceive it distinctly from the buggy on the ground, so if it landed on the ground, it would likely have a large enough build to dwarf a human.

“Oooh, how unusual. It's an albatross! A kind of living fossil.”

Mismis let out a small cheer of joy from the driver's seat.

“It's the great ancestor of the birds. They pretty much don't live in Imperial territory at all. We use a lot of guns in the training grounds right? They hate the sound of gunfire, and all ran far away.”

“Away from the Empire?”

“Yup yup. But albatrosses are smart, so when they are fed they can be made into watchdogs, with some training it is possible for humans to ride on their backs while they fly. That's why it seems like in villages far away from the Empire, they train them even now. For example.”

While following the bird with her eyes, Mismis continued her explanation.

“They keep several of them even in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency, I've seen a report that stated that.”

“...Nebulis?”

Iska looked up at the albatross while squinting through the sunlight. It was flying in from the northeast. It was just as Mismis had said, it was coming in from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency's territory. Not only that, perhaps it was just a hallucination, but Iska felt like he could see something riding on the back of the bird as it flapped its wings.

“...Could it be?”

“Iska-kun?”

“Captain, please continue like this to the entrance and stop the car there.”

The albatross passed over the city walls and began descending. As if chasing it, the buggy they were riding also arrived at the walls of Ayin.

“Hey hey Iska-kun, so about that person you want to meet, what are you going to do about it?”

“They probably, just arrived as well.”

Up in the skies. As if being sucked up by the sunlight pouring down above, the albatross was ascending into the sky. Having finished its role of delivering its master to the Neutral City, it was likely returning to its nest in the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency.

“This way.”

“U-un?”

Exchanging looks with Mismis, Iska walked down the streets of the Neutral City Ayin. The city where the arts bloomed. Just like when he came to see the opera, despite the heat wave, buskers were performing music outdoors, painters had their canvases spread out, and tourists were watching over them attentively with joy. It was a moment of peace that made one forget the times. While the Empire and the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency fought violent battles, in truth, people were able to live a life unrelated to battles just like this. It was a sight that gave one that impression.

“—”

Standing before a plaza, Iska came to a stop.

“We really do think alike do we not? I wonder just what star we were born under?”

A beautiful young woman carrying a parasol. She was not wearing clothes for travelling incognito. Just like the first time he met her, she was wearing vivid royal garments.

“That albatross just now.”

“We raised it back at home. When it was a chick it was small enough to hold in one's hand, but after four years it became that large. It flies much faster than an Imperial car after all.”

“Alice-sama, even if you say that, were you not yelling 'Rin, quickly, faster. It's a race! Hurry it up so that we make it there before that car no matter what!' just a moment ago?”

“Rin.”

“...It was a slip of the tongue.”

Rin stepped back. Giving her a sidelong glance, Alice closed her parasol with graceful movements.

“That's right. About the taxi last time—”

“What are you talking about I wonder?”

The princess from the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency broke out an amused smile for only an instant. But immediately afterwards, she tightened her mouth, and squinted her eyes slightly. What she was looking at was not Iska, but the petite female captain with blue hair beside him.

“By the way, who is that girl beside you?”

“My superior, Captain Mismis.”

“...I see. You also had such circumstances.”

Alice muttered as she passed her parasol over to Rin.

“Ummm, Iska-kun? Who is this pretty girl?”

“She's—”

“It is fine, I will name myself.”

Interrupting Iska, Alice placed her hand on her chest. And in a quiet voice that those walking around in the area could not hear...

“It is a pleasure to meet you, captain from the Empire. My name is Alice — Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX.”

“Alice-san? Eh, but... N-Nebulis?”

“Would you understand better if I were to call myself the 'Ice Witch of Calamity' as you would say in the Empire?”

“~~~~!?”

Mismis' entire body twitched.

“U-ummm? It's a joke, right... Iska-kun?”

“It's true.”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what's going on!?”

“I have something to talk about with him.”

As Alice said that, her gaze was fixated only on Iska.

“Let's go somewhere else. Follow me.”

“Got it. Captain, let's go.”

“...What's going on...?”

Taking his somewhat dumbfounded captain along, Iska followed after the other two. Alice looked directly in front of herself. As for Rin who trailing behind to her side, she would turn around frequently to look at Iska.

“I won't run away. And there isn't anyone else than just us two.”

“Sh-shut up! I am Alice-sama's attendant, what's wrong with me keeping an eye on you two who are her enemies. Rather, do not talk to me so readily!”

Rin turned back forward in a hurry. Seeing that she reflexively brought her hand closer to her skirt, there was no doubt that there was a great number of dark tools hidden underneath there.

“How mysterious.”

What Alice pointed out to with her gaze, was on the right side of the street. There was a painter with his canvas facing the street, and a parent and child having their portrait drawn by the artist.

“Even though there is such a happy city, I wonder why we must hate each other?”

It wasn't directed towards Iska or Mismis. Alice's mutter may have been pointed at herself. Passing one step through the walls of the city, all they could see before their eyes, was a hill scorched by the sun spreading out in every direction.

“It's hot isn't it?”

“Alice-sama, your parasol.”

“—I am fine with this.”

The Ice Witch of Calamity extended her finger.

“I'll just freeze it suitably after all.”

Cold air gushed out from the ground at Alice's feet. The sand at their feet that was hot enough to burn bare skin was cooled in an instant, and the ground began to freeze over several hundred metres in the direction they were walking. It was just like a carpet of ice.

“Wh-what's with this... Even though the Empire's newest weapons can't make this kind of cold...”

Mismis walked timidly along the frozen path.

“Sh-she's really the Ice Witch of Calamity...”

“I do believe I said so myself.”

The captain from the Empire seemed to finally understand just who she was. There was likely no better persuasive force than that kind of method.

“It should be about fine if we have walked this far. Here, nobody should be able to hear us. And it seems that neither of us are being tailed.”

Nebulis' princess came to a stop. They had been walking along the carpet of ice for about ten minutes. At a distance where the Neutral City could only be seen as a distant haze, Alice turned around.

“You likely have an idea of what it is I have to say. The Imperial soldier who was arrested for treason against the state one year ago. The eccentric Holy Apostle who is said to have broken a captured star mage out of an Imperial jail.”

“...”

"I had it investigated. You know about who I am, so is it not only fair?"

Alice looked down at Iska from atop a hill of ice.

"Well, yeah."

"Besides, there is no way a swordsman with your strength would be a lower class soldier. Though it's a different story if you tell me that captain next to you is stronger than you."

"Heh? Th-th-th-that's not the case!?"

Glared at by the Ice Witch of Calamity, Mismis jumped back in a fluster.

"More importantly... Wh-what business do you have with us!? A big shot among big shots like you, waiting for Iska-kun, I don't get it at all!"

"I have something I would like to ask."

Alice exchanged looks with Rin. Returning her gaze, the attendant took out a faded magazine. It was familiar. It was a magazine that Iska was shown many times over while he was imprisoned after all.

"First, is what is written here the truth?"

"Without a doubt."

"About letting a star mage go, and because of that, you having spent one year within prison?"

Iska silently nodded.

"I wonder why you did it?"

"...She was still a small girl. At around twelve or thirteen years old, she only had a weak star spirit within her. It's just, the Empire arrests star mages without any connection to that, and I didn't like it."

"Your speech and conduct are contradicting each other."

There was a biting tone to the voice of the young woman known as the Ice Witch of Calamity.

“You were, expecting me in the Nelka Forest. Did you not attack me with the purpose of capturing me? When it came to me, you're trying to capture a star mage, I don't believe your reasoning for letting one go a year ago because you found her pitiful.”

“...”

“Silence, is it? What's wrong, Imperial soldier?”

The young attendant raised her voice.

“Are you unable to speak after having the weak points of your story pointed out by Alice-sama? I remember well when you asked me, 'Are you the Ice Witch of Calamity?' In any case, the jailbreak of the witch one year ago is just a trick to—”

“I'm not contradicting myself.”

He cut her off completely. Perhaps because she sensed the strength of the emotions in his words, Rin kept silent after being interrupted.

“One year ago, and now, my goal has never changed.”

“Does that have anything to do with the article in this magazine?”

“Peace talks.”

Iska spoke that single phrase as he stood before Alice. It was the first time. The first time that he conveyed his vow to himself before a star mage from Nebulis.

“I want to end the fighting. But no matter what I say, there is no way the Emperor will listen to me, and I do not believe the queen of the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency will listen to me either.”

“Naturally so.”

Alice nodded with a cold tone.

“You say that you desire peace? It is useless. How much do you think our nations hate

each other? The war will not end until one side surrenders.”

“That's right. That's why what I thought of was capturing a direct descendant of Nebulis. To capture a powerful star mage that the Empire calls pure blood.”

“The royal family?”

“I thought it would shake the Nebulis royal family greatly if one of their own was in danger. And even the citizens of the Imperial Household Agency would likely be anxious. That's why they would only be able to comply with participating in peace talks even if they hated it.”

“...Are you saying that, all on your own, you plan to forcefully pave the way to peace talks?”

Alice folded her arms while knitting her brows, and then putting her finger up to her charming mouth—

“If you capture me and make me a hostage, even the Queen would be obliged to come to the table for peace talks. However, the child you let go one year ago was just a weak star mage. She had no role in the peace talks you are thinking about. So you thought it would be fine to just let her go?”

And then a moment of silence.

“...Certainly, there are no contradiction. On the contrary, it is consistent.”

As Alice said that, her mouth almost looked like she was making an astonished laugh.

“It probably isn't a lie huh. Somehow, it really seems like an idea you'd think of... But, it won't work. Nothing will change that way.”

“Why?”

“Even if you make me a prisoner, Mother will not move. That's why there will be no room for negotiations. Peace talks are just a pipe dream. You have likely never been to the Imperial Household Agency. You would not know how much the people of our country hate the Empire.”

The roots of the war that continued for a hundred years were deep. Even with a pure

blood witch, a single hostage would not bring peace talks into existence. The people of the Imperial Household Agency would not allow it after all.

“...However.”

Alice unfolded her arms.

“I also didn't know that there were people like you in the Empire. Among the savage and overbearing Imperial soldiers, I didn't think there was one who desired battle for the sake of 'ending the fighting.' Moreover... I do believe I have grasped your character well here in the Neutral City.”

The Ice Witch of Calamity's finger pointed over towards Iska. From atop a hill of ice, Aliceliese Lou Nebulus IX made a declaration in a loud voice.

“You, should become my subordinate.”

“What!?”

The one to let out a shriek, was Rin.

“Wait a, Alice-sama!? Wh-wh-wh-what's going on!? This isn't what you said before, you didn't mention anything about this when we were preparing last night!?”

“I just thought of it now.”

“It is far too erratic! In the first place, taking an Imperial soldier in as a subordinate, let alone the Queen, there's no way your esteemed sisters will allow it!”

“I can think of that kind of thing later.”

Be quiet — Holding her hand out to the side, she silenced Rin.

“I will guarantee your social position. You would become an exile from the Empire.”

The princess continued speaking in a fluent voice.

“The Imperial Household Agency accepts anybody as long as they do not discriminate against star mages. This applies even more to one who knows of the internal affairs of the Empire and has enough strength to rise to the status of a Holy Apostle who also

desires to create a world without fighting.”

She poured it on with a straightforward gaze. While her tone was commanding, there was also a sincere zeal and hope in her voice. However...

“I-Iska-kun...?”

A slender and shaking finger pressed against his back. As he looked slightly to the side, what he could see was the petite female captain, contracting her shoulders in anxiety, and half on the verge of tears and she looked up at him.

“U-um, you know... Um...”

“It's alright.”

Before she could say anything, he gently stopped her.

“I can't do it.”

Moreover, Iska replied to the princess standing atop the hill of ice.

“It has nothing to do with my reception, I can't go to Nebulis' side.”

“...Why is that?”

The blonde haired girl's eyelid twitched. It was not out of anger, but a manifestation of her unease. Aah, in the end, that's how you'll answer — her tone made one think she had such anxieties within her.

“Let me hear your reason.”

“I have two reasons. First, even I have friends and family within the Empire. My comrades in my squad are one thing, but I also have superiors that I am indebted to. It is just the same as Alice who has family within the Imperial Household Agency.”

“The other reason?”

“Because it's impossible to bring up peace talks from the side of the Nebulis Imperial Household agency. Even if our positions were reversed, if Alice were to make one of the Eight Grand Apostles a hostage and try to bring them to peace talks, the Empire

would turn a deaf ear. Rather, they would likely be thinking that the number of rivals had simply decreased. Unlike Alice who is connected by blood to the royal family, they are nothing but strangers to each other.”

To bring an end to the fighting that had gone on for a hundred years without it ending with the ruin of one country, there was no other way than to forcefully bring them to peace talks. And those peace talks, were something that was only possible if the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency was the side to agree to them.

“Yes. That is exactly the Empire that I know of. No matter who it is, once they have served their purpose, they are cast away. A gathering of humans that one would not think of as humans...”

Alice bit down on her lower lip. The magazine that she was gripping in her hand had a slight bit of frost clinging to it, and ice had become covering the surface of the paper.

“However, do you understand what significance your reply has?”

“...I know.”

Stepping back — while restraining Mismis with his left hand, Iska's right hand went around to his back. A hard sensation. His finger met the hilt of his star sword.

“I cannot, walk together with you, Alice.”

“...I see. So you and I are enemies after all!”

The magazine shattered into pieces. It became fragments of ice and vanished, the fragments of the memories of their past. That was, the instant the connection between the two was severed.

“If you can capture me, then show me that you can.”

As Rin began to move, Alice held her back. And she covered her face with the headdress she used in the Nelka forest.

“If by any chance you are able to do so, even if it is a one in a million chance, if Mother would negotiate with the Empire, your dream may just be granted.”

“Likewise, you should just eliminate me as you see fit. It will become progress in

Alice's unification of the world.”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

With a headdress covering her face and emotions, a witch.

Gripping onto a star sword in each hand, a soldier from the Empire.

Behind each of them, Rin and Mismis both stepped back as they even forgot to breathe and watched over them.

““You, obstinate fool!””

An angry roar from the boy and girl. As if their mutual anguish was being revealed to the wasteland.

An unavoidable future. Within that vortex of fate that they should have known, their anger and grief stuck together and rang out in a shriek.

And at the same time, Alice's star spirit, and Iska's star swords, as if resonating with each other, the earth shook greatly.

—The rage called forth by the stars.

“Wha!?”

Bringing his dash to a stop in an instant, the cold that was conveyed through his hand, ran through Iska's body like electricity.

...*What?*

...*Just now... An unthinkable strong chill!?*

He had never experienced it before. No matter what battle he fought, no matter how close he came to death, he had never sensed such thirst for blood. He could feel it with his skin that it was filling the atmosphere.

“Rin, what was that just now?”

“...I do not know. But my star spirit is also frightened. I can't control it!”

“Wait, I can hear something.”

Alice removed the headdress that she had just put on. The young woman known as the strongest star mage in the Imperial Household Agency, spoke in a stifled breath.

“There's something in the sky... — Rin, get out of the way!”

“Captain Mismis, get away!”

With a crack, a fissure formed in the blue sky. The moment they thought they saw a pitch black thread running across the sky, the sky split open, and an intense gale poured out of it.

“Kya...!”

Unable to withstand the gale, the petite captain fell over. And during that, Iska was certain of what he saw appear in the air.

“...Star sword. The blade, that betrayed the stars...”

It was a girl with long pearl grey hair. Under her large, wavy and irregularly patterned cloak, her body was darkly tanned. And she appeared far too young. From her outward appearance, she only seemed to be twelve or thirteen years old. However, precisely because of that...

“The Founder?”

Iska doubted the word that he heard Alice leak out.

“Why is the esteemed Founder who is supposed to be sleeping underground here...? No, why did she awaken...?”

It was someone that a direct descendant of Nebulis, Alice, respected as the 'Founder.' There was only one person who would come to mind.

“The Empire... The ones who... Ruined... This star... This vessel of the star spirit...”

What came out of her small and charming mouth, was the pure embodiment of a grudge.



“...”

“All should just vanish.”

The Great Witch waved her hand in the air. The instant they realized this, Iska and Alice both leaped back to cover for the ones behind them.

—An invisible rupture.

As if an invisible god's hand was swung in the air, the atmosphere condensed, and immediately following that, a violent shockwave exploded and scattered into the area.

“Wh-what!? What just happened!?”

“I don't know. It's just...”

Within the slowly rising cloud of dust, Iska let go of Mismis. He was fully aware that cold sweat was pouring down his back.

“Captain, fall back to the rear. Against just this opponent, I don't have any confidence.”

The shadow of a person hanging in the clear blue sky.

The Great Witch Nebulis—

One hundred years ago, the oldest star mage who changed the Imperial capital into a sea of fire, manifested in the skies above them.

Chapter 5

'Founder'

1

A moment ago.

The royal palace of Nebulis was going through an unprecedented rumbling. The rumbling which could be associated with the end of the world cracked the earth, and broke windows in the royal palace one after the other.

“Each and every star spirit in the Imperial Household Agency is resonating? What is going on?”

Mirabelle Lou Nebulis VIII, the queen of Nebulis was walking down the hidden passage while the rumbling was happening. At the end of the natural limestone cavern, illuminated by a bonfire, two soldiers down on their knees rose before her.

“What is going on? To have called me here in such a situation.”

“Ha! That's...!”

The two who raised their faces pointed behind them. A massive black pillar. And crucified on it, the sleeping Founder Nebulis was—

“The Founder's bindings have been undone!?”

The chain that had been binding both her hands and feet, had shattered to pieces.

“What happened?”

“We also do not... But, the Founder suddenly swung her arm—”

“Are you saying that she tore off the chains on her own? And, at the same time this rumbling broke out. So that is why you have called me here.”

While floating in the air, the dark skinned girl did not show the slightest movement. Her head was hanging down, and both her eyes that could barely be seen were shut tight. Just from her appearance, she seemed to still be asleep.

“ ... ”

And so, the dark skinned girl slowly raised her head.

“Star sword... The wavelength of a strong star spirit... Is fighting...?”

She spoke as if talking to herself, and immediately following that, her body rotated in the air, and the star crest on her back began to pour out a jet black mist.

“Is that a star spirit!? The star spirit in her body is...!”

The star spirit manifested as jet black wings on her back. And as those wings flapped slowly, the girl's eyes remained shut.

“The star spirit's automatic defence? The star spirit, is protecting the Founder!?”

The queen did not know what those words 'star sword' that the Founder spoke of were referring to, but it was a grave matter if the star spirit within the Founder was taking action to protect her.

“Founder!”

“—Star sword... Return it, to me...”

The jet black wings covered the girl's body. And immediately following that, the body of the oldest star mage vanished as if unifying with the air.

“She vanished?”

The soldiers stood there with dumbfounded expressions. Giving them a backwards glance, the queen looked at the black pillar before her and drew nearer. She then touched the surface of the stone which served as the Founder Nebulis' bed with her finger.

“...The reason is unknown. But there is nothing more we can wish for than our dear Founder awakening. As long as we have her honourable power...”

Without being seen by anyone, the queen made a cold smile.

“I can see the Empire's defeat.”

Sand kicked up like fine particles.

After the wind drove away the cloud of sand which was thick enough to visually obstruct anything one metre away, what Iska witnessed, was an enormous scar in the earth in the shape of a massive bowl like depression.

The slightly elevated slope had been completely destroyed, and created a gaping wide hole in the ground. Iska had seen Imperial cannons firing on uninhabited open fields in the training grounds, and the destructive force on display here was comparable to that. However, the decisive difference here was—

The strike which caused such destruction was invisible, it wasn't clear what had happened. And the one who created that scar, was a single little girl.

“The Founder Nebulis...”

She was a small girl with dark skin and pearl grey hair. On her back, what appeared to be jet black wings had manifested, and she was floating far off in the empty sky.

“I-Iska-kun? U-um... By Founder, you don't mean...”

“It's probably just as Captain Mismis is thinking. The Great Witch Nebulis is still alive. For one hundred years, ever since she caused that incident in the Empire.”

The unanalytical energy of the stars, 'star spirits.'

Everything began when scientists from the Empire discovered it deep underground. The unanalytical energy possessed a portion of humans, and granted its host unusual powers. That was the origin of the star mages — the ones called witches and warlocks by the Empire.

...And among them, the girl who bathed in the absolutely most powerful energy.

...That is definitely, the one the Empire at the time feared the most as a witch.

Having received a far crueller persecution than any other, she was the star mage who bore the deepest grudge against the Empire. That was the girl known as the Great

Witch.

“That's unfair! Even though it's just me and Iska-kun...!”

The petite female captain mustered up her strength and yelled in complaint as she pointed at the two star mages in front of her eyes.

“The Founder Nebulis... To have such a legendarily strong witch tailing us. Are you saying it's fine to do anything you want just because negotiations broke down? Is that how you do things in Nebulis!?”

“W-wait!”

Her eyes met Alice's. And with a frantic look, she replied while her blonde hair was thrown out of order.

“You're wrong! I didn't do anything!”

“...Eh?”

“Rin, it couldn't be you?”

“I-it wasn't. The last time I saw the esteemed Founder was in the underground passage together with Alice-sama. I haven't been informed of such a thing by the Queen either!”

The attendant was yelling to the point where her voice was hoarse. And overhead as she did, the jet black wings of the Founder flickered.

'Interfere with the memory of the stars.'

'Connect with the 'will' using the third layer. Call forth the surface of the star.'

With a crack, a fissure formed in the air at the Great Witch's feet. Through that crack in the blue sky, 'something' red could be seen.

...What is that? Something is coming out of that space just like Nebulis did.

...Red. Call forth? It couldn't be, that's...

It was bad. Believing in his intuition, Iska let out a cry from where he was standing.

“Dive into the crater!”

Grabbing Mismis' hand forcefully, he pulled her into the crater.

“Take cover, Alice!”

“Eh?”

“You'll be swallowed by the flames!”

Together with Mismis, Iska slid down the side of the crater. And as Alice and Rin also tumbled down, that, came out of the shattered space with a bright red glow.

The star spirit of flame. No — that, had already surpassed the concept of a star spirit, it was an eruption of unanalytical energy that had human intelligence.

“Mow them down.”

A tremendous detonation.

The atmosphere scorched by the star spirit of flame expanded into a shockwave at the speed of raging billows, and as the flames bonded with oxygen, they triggered a violent chain reaction of explosions. There was likely no other way of escaping those explosions other than taking cover in the crater. However...

“Hot!?”

Mismis screamed out as she put her hands to her ears.

“This is bad Iska-kun. The heat wave is reaching the bottom of the—”

“Seal it.”

At Alice's command, cold air took action. Like white gems, a sparkling wall of frost was born, and became a curtain to seal off the heat wave.

“Alice-sama. Are you even going to protect these people?”

“This isn't the time for that is it?”

Rin pointed a vigilant gaze over to Alice. On the other hand, Alice scowled at the wall of ice in the air and didn't move an inch. The Founder should have been the ultimate reinforcement for them, but looking at her profile, it was clear she was also bewildered.

“With both the first attack, and with the explosive flames now, the esteemed Founder has been attacking even us.”

“Th-that's... Is it not because only the Imperial soldiers entered her vision?”

“It's inexcusable to attack even us just for that kind of reason. Even just now, if Iska had not said anything, we wouldn't have gotten away in time. Isn't that right?”

“...That's, certainly true.”

While clenching her fists, Rin agreed.

“It is the truth... That we were saved by an Imperial swordsman. In the Founder's eyes, perhaps she sees us as his companions?”

“Wait. Isn't that Founder you're talking about your ally?”

Iska interrupted the attendant who had fallen to her knees while replying. Setting aside the fact that they were being attacked by the Great Witch Nebulis, Iska and Mismis knew practically nothing of the circumstances of the ones on the Imperial Household Agency's side.

“In the first place, we don't even know if that is really Nebulis herself.”

“After being shown such power, do you still doubt that she is a fake?”

Rin scowled at Iska.

“The star mage that the Empire calls the Great Witch. As the one who founded our country, the people of Nebulis call her the Founder.”

“Then, why is that Founder attacking her direct descendant Alice?”

“..”

The star mage went silent with a gulp. Answering would be a leak of confidential information, and as she remained silent, the other star mage present spoke of it eloquently with her gaze cast down.

“It is likely the star spirit's automated defence.”

“...Alice-sama.”

“There's already no point in hiding it before someone who knows that the Founder is alive.”

Nebulis' princess turned towards Iska.

“A hundred years ago, when the Founder was exhausted from the battle with the Empire, it is said that she went to sleep to heal her body. The true nature of the star spirit within the Founder's body is unknown to all. We call it the 'star spirit of space and time,' but that is nothing but a nickname.”

“A star spirit unknown to all...”

“That star spirit of space and time protects the sleeping Founder.”

Alice spoke of it like it was only natural. Among the star spirits, there were star spirits who protected their host humans. Iska had also heard before that the larger the star spirit, the more remarkable it was, but in the Empire, it was all still at the level of hypothesizing.

“Is Nebulis still sleeping?”

“She probably is. Setting aside what she reacted to, the attack from the star spirit of space and time is far too indiscriminate, it is likely because the Founder who controls that star spirit is sleeping. I can comprehend it if that is the case, but...”

Nebulis' princess stopped for a moment there. And then, with a worn out voice...

“How frustrating...”

“Frustrating?”

“_”

Ever since she started staring up at the girl in the sky, she turned to face Iska for the first time. Like red moons, her ruby eyes opened widely, and without blinking or swaying, she silently stared at Iska.

“I... For just this matter, I wanted to settle it just between you and I.”

Alice bit her lower lip. As if enduring something, she looked like she was crying while smiling.

“Ever since meeting you in the Neutral City, a strange haze has been building up inside me... That is a failure of me as a princess. Today, I came with the intent of severing all that off. I was thinking of bringing an end to the fight that was interrupted in the Nelka Forest. That's why I came wearing the same uniform as that time. The same clothes as when we first fought.”

Nebulis' royal garments. And while gripping the crumpled hem of her skirt...

“...I really put my spirit into it. I didn't report it to Mother, and I even made sure that Rin would not interfere at all. I thought I would be able to settle it just between the two of us without anybody getting in the way after all. And yet, of all things, for that kind of bitch to thoughtlessly butt in, it's a huge nuisance!”

“Th-th-that kind of bitch!? Alice-sama how can you speak of the Founder that—”

“Enough. At any rate, we can't just stay here immobile. We're breaking out.”

Alice snapped her fingers. The curtain of ice burst open and flew into the sky as it collided with the current of flames still blowing violently overhead. And as if devouring each other, the heat wave and cold wave cancelled each other out.

“Captain, run.”

They ran up the slope of the crater. Waiting for them in the sky filled with a countless number of embers, was the Great Witch, still making the same expressionless face as if nothing had happened with her eyes tightly shut.

...It's true that I can't sense her consciousness.

...Alice's description of her being still asleep is probably on point.

Having sensed an Imperial soldier, she was automatically counterattacking from above. It was safe to assume that being given that order before Nebulis went to sleep, even after a hundred years, the star spirit of space and time faithfully continued to protect her.

“Our esteemed Founder, I thank you for providing your assistance in the fight between this Imperial soldier and I. However, I wish to settle the score with this one just between the two of us!”

Alice mustered up her voice and yelled to the skies.

“Please return to the royal palace!”

“—”

The oldest star mage remained silent. Even unconscious as she was, as she continued to float there with her head drooping down, it certainly looked like Alice's words reached her ears. However...

“It's hopeless! You can't, Alice-sama!”

Rin grabbed her master's hand as she pulled her back. As a first class star mage, as the one who was polished to serve as Alice's guard ever since she was a child, it was possible for her to predict what would occur the instant the Founder began moving using her ability to sense danger.

“A star mage would get in my way? If you are to consort with the Empire...”

To the oldest star mage, even if it were the words of another star mage, they were nothing but droplets of water before the raging flames that was her hatred. Alice did not know that. In other words, all that would obstruct her vengeance were her enemies.

“Vanish from this star.”

A massive sword of fire.

Higher in the blue sky than where Nebulis was floating, a red blotch was given birth.

And from that crack in space, a flame modelled after a blade came crashing down towards the earth. Severing the atmosphere, it was a super high temperature blade which could fuse the earth itself. And as the blade which measured over a hundred metres long closed in...

“Alice-sama, look out!”

A golem rose up out of the earth at Rin's feet. Despite showing devotion to the one known as the Founder, precisely because she held caution against her deep in her heart, she secretly had a countermeasure prepared beforehand.

“Rin!?”

The golem pushed Alice out of the flaming blade's range. What Mismis could see while being carried by Iska, was only up until that moment.

—The flaming sword bore into the earth.

The earth struck by the sword fused and turned into magma, and the earth further down the trajectory of the slash split open, spewing up a massive heat wave along with sparks. The sparks shot up into the air, and spread flames out over an even wider area.

“Iska-kun! The flames are going to the city...!?”

Mismis shrieked. Seeing the skies above the Neutral City dyed in red, the squad captain from the Empire made an expression full of grief.

“We have to save them!”

“Calm down Captain. It looks showy, but there are only sparks falling down. Most of them will vanish when they hit the ground, if we deal with it calmly it won't break out into a conflagration... Instead of that, we need to focus on the enemy in the sky.”

Just how could they deal with the absolute worst enemy imaginable, the Founder Nebulis? Even if they requested reinforcements from the Imperial capital, they were too far away. They couldn't even get support from Jhin or Nene. While Iska was about to say this, what came into his sight was—

“Rin!? Rin, answer me!”

The young attendant who had collapsed onto the hideously burned earth.

The figure of Alice who was holding her with a frantic expression as she screamed her name.

In front of them, the golem had crumbled to pieces, and returned to clumps of earth on the wasteland.

She succeeded in getting Alice out of the range of the massive flaming sword, but Rin herself wasn't able to get away in time. She managed to escape a direct hit from the flame itself using the golem, but she could do nothing about the heat wave in the air.

“Rin, I'm begging you, open your...”

“Don't move her around too much.”

Grasping a black star sword, Iska commanded Alice to stop shaking her attendant's shoulders, and jumped in front of the two girls.

—A single slash.

As the second wave of flames came down on a defenceless Alice, the black blade severed it. And then, as if dissolving into the air, the flames vanished.

“That's what your star spirit is for isn't it?”

“Eh?”

“Cool Rin's body with ice. Deal with the burns while you still can.”

“...!”

Nebulis' princess raised her face in astonishment. And at the same time, cold air gathered at her fingertip, and she slowly wrapped the air around Rin's body.

“Captain Mismis, take her to a hospital! If you can, please show her to a specialist when it came to star spirit cases!”

Iska pointed at the Neutral City Ayin, the city that sparks continued to rain down on.

“And make a request for the citizens of the city to remain where they are. Absolutely do not let them leave the city's walls. This wasteland is about to become an extremely dangerous battlefield.”

“...Eh? U-um...”

“Quickly!”

“U-un! Iska-kun, be careful!”

The female captain's determination came quickly. Carrying the star mage who was supposed to be her enemy on her back, she ran towards the city that could be seen far away. Without seeing her off, Iska directed his gaze at the enemy in the sky.

The Founder Nebulis.

The ultimate star mage who had become obsessed with the flawed idea of vengeance.

“Nebulis.”

A black star sword in his right hand, a white star sword in his left hand. While brandishing the only star swords in the world that were entrusted to him by his master...

“A hundred years ago, you may have been the hope which guided all star mages. However, you're wrong. I can tell from watching your actions. You are—”

“You are no longer needed in this day and age!”

A voice which sounded like a bell made of ice. Strong, clear, and without a single hint of hesitation. It rang out through the wasteland.

“What kind of Founder are you? You should be ashamed. This age does not wish for you!”

The one who made that declaration, was the girl standing beside Iska.

“Getting in the way of me settling things with Iska, causing harm to the Neutral City, and to even wound Rin, another star mage...! Nebulis, only you are truly a witch!”

Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX.

The one who carried the burden of being the current princess of the Imperial Household Agency, thrust her finger at the founder of that same Imperial Household Agency.

“Nothing can be born of your power. It won't make anybody happy.”

“Agreed. This is, no longer the age that you know of.”

One step, the two moved forwards.

“Imperial soldier. Star mage. You bastards—”

““Silence!””

Cutting off the Founder's words, standing before the witch who was caught in her endless dream, their voices cried out in perfect harmony.

“Your actions are nothing but a vain effort. The future that I seek does not exist there.”

“Nor does the world I desire.”

The two of them understood each other. They were enemies. The day that they would collide would come. However, that conclusion was something the two of them would bring about only between them. Unwanted interventions were not needed.

“That's why—”

““You should once more, sleep for another hundred years!””

The Successor of Black Steel Iska and the Ice Witch of Calamity Alice. Entrusting their backs to each other, the two roared in unison.

Chapter 6

The Successor of Black Steel Iska and the Ice Witch of Calamity

1

The Imperial Capital, Sector 3.

Looking up at the sun stretching up into the sky through a glass window, Nene brushed away her bangs covered in sweat from her brow with her finger.

“Phew. It's hoooot. It's already noon too~.”

Sweat was dripping down from the tips of her hair like drops of water. Wearing training wear consisting of thin cloth, a set of machines she was using for muscle training was lined up behind her.

“Hey, Jhin-niichan, are Iska-nii and Captain Mismis still not back? Nene's already tired of the eternal indoor training.”

“It's training to protect yourself. There's nothing to get tired of.”

The one to reply to her was the silver haired sniper sitting on a metal bench. Having finished his personal training a step ahead of her, he was now performing maintenance on his favourite rifle.

“That may be so~, but that's not what I mean. That's not what Nene wants to say~.”

“That we should all be doing it together?”

“Yeah! That's it Jhin-niichan, I knew you would get it!”

“It's fine just for today isn't it? We know that they went to the Neutral City after all.”

“But what for?”

The previous evening, they were suddenly contacted by their captain. Normally, that captain wouldn't conceal anything when asked 'What for?' or 'Where to?' but just this time, she was unusually inarticulate. When asked again, it seemed the captain herself did not actually know.

“If it's something that concerns the squad then he would be meeting them in the Imperial capital. Since that's not the case, it probably isn't business that we need to worry about.”

“But he's going with Captain Mismis you know?”

“...”

While tightly grasping the sighting device he removed from his rifle, Jhin remained silent for a moment.

“...It's a fact that Iska's condition has been slightly off.”

After a while, as if carefully selecting his words, he spoke in a quiet tone.

“Slightly off? Not good or bad?”

“It's like he's not properly engaged. Like the gears of his spirit and body are slightly off. That guy's been saying he hasn't been sleeping well lately right?”

“Un, ever since we went to the Nelka forest.”

“That's where he encountered the Ice Witch of Calamity.”

The sniper sat on the bench with one knee up. And while holding his arm up with his own knee...

“And after that, he went to the Neutral City without pause right? If it's that city, then nobody would know if someone from the Empire was meeting someone from the Imperial Household Agency. Iska went there twice, and the third time the Captain is going along huh...”

“Eh? What? What? Jhin-niichan, hey, what are you thinking of!?”

“...No, it's nothing.”

“Liar!? Jhin-niichan, you just looked away from Nene right!?”

“Aah, dammit, keep quiet. Look, the guys around us are looking over like we're being annoying—”

A mechanical click could be heard at Jhin's knees. The communication device that he had placed on the bench suddenly began flickering with a red light.

“An emergency call huh. Not only that... Speak of the devil.”

“Captain Mismis?”

“If you trust the displayed name that is.”

Jhin glared at the liquid display screen, and then brought the receiver to his ear.

“It's me. I'm together with Nene, we're in the middle of training. Of course, we're ready to take action in case anything happens.”

Nene closely observed the moment that clever pair of eyes shot open.

“...The Founder Nebulis? Wait, Captain, calm down. What do you mean?”

Jhin stood up. And while gripping the sighting device in his hand...

“...Understood. No, I don't get at all how it came to this, but I do at least mean to understand what is happening and where.”

Jhin shot a glance over to Nene. Just from the tension in his gaze, she could tell that something unusual had happened.

“The Neutral City Ayin. Even if Nene and I hurried over, it's too far. Who is the one pinning... Iska? Did he say that he would do it on his own?”

Silence. And as a moment passed, the sniper who knew that man best made a resolute declaration.

“Then Nene and I won't be needed. Captain, it'll be fine if you just find shelter... Ah? The legendary Great Witch? I know that. But it doesn't matter.”

“B-but Jhin-kun?”

“If his opponent is a star mage, Iska won't lose. If that guy doesn't do it, who's gonna stop this useless war?”

And so, Jhin made a declaration with absolute confidence to the female captain on the other side of the line.

“He's the 'Successor of Black Steel' for precisely that reason.”

A burned wasteland.

With the Neutral City Ayin under a rain of sparks as a backdrop, he ran up a hill as flames and clouds of sand flew about him.

"Imperial soldier..."

The Founder Nebulis was still floating over ten metres in the air. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she was practically expressionless. And that completely emotionless dark skinned girl threw out her slender hands. It was just as if she was conducting an orchestra.

"Pet dog of the Empire. Just how much have you bastards tyrannized the star mages?"

The wings on the girl's back shined with a light. The light from those lustrous jet black wings, was crimson.

"Vanish."

The sound of the air suddenly combusting rang out. The moment Iska felt heat on his back, he kicked into the earth and leaped into the air.

"...So you avoided it."

"I'm not avoiding it."

The Great Witch knit her brows at having her flames perceived upon activation. However, Iska immediately denied her muttering.

"This is so that I can reach you."

The shockwave from the exploding flame pushed on Iska's back. Using the strength of his own legs in addition to the lifting power of the air current born of the fire, he soared into the sky. It was far closer to flight than a leap.

"To use the force from the flames to jump, that's quite some skillful nonsense."

Into the sky where the Founder Nebulis was waiting...

...Jet black wings.

...Right now, when the star spirit's power activated, those wings definitely shined.

Her wings were the same colour as his black star sword. They held the secret to Nebulis' power. Relying on that gut feeling on the spot, Iska raised his star sword overhead. And with the intent to sever the wings from the Great Witch's back—

“If you think your sword will reach me, then freeze together with your fleeting hope.”

He could hear the sound of something hard creaking. It was the sound of the moisture in the air between Iska and Nebulis freezing from the star spirit's power.

“Ice, no way!?”

The number of star spirits that a human could house in their body was limited to one. Just a moment ago, didn't she just let loose a hellfire?

...She's not manipulating fire?

...That's strange. A star spirit should only be able to interfere with a single phenomenon.

Just what was the Great Witch's star spirit? As the wall of ice closed in on Iska and began to fall to the ground like a block of ice intending to crush Iska while he was in the air, Iska could only engross himself at the strange phenomenon before him.

“Iska!”

A cry blew away his idle thoughts. The one to trigger that reaction, was none other than Alice who was looking up at him from the ground.

“HA!”

Holding the black star sword in an underhand grip, Iska stabbed it into the wall of ice. Using that as an axis, he planted his feet against the wall. And using the slightest depression on its surface, Iska kicked off the wall and escaped from being crushed into the ground. The wall of ice crashed and shattered into countless fragments. However, Nebulis was not watching the shattered ruins of the ice, but the Imperial swordsman

who escaped being crushed by it.

“So you dodged a second time...”

'Interfere with the memory of the stars.'

'Connect with the 'will' using the second layer. Call forth the surface of the star.'

The Great Witch snapped her finger, the air before her split apart vertically, and as if a tentacle was slithering out of it, ochre sand stretched out of the fissure.

...Last time fire crept out of the fissure.

...It couldn't be the next one is also?

Stooping down, Iska crossed his two star swords in front of him and took his stance. Was it going to be the exploding fire that burned the wasteland? Or was it going to be the ultra heavy block of ice? Or perhaps both? While anticipating the oncoming attack, Iska began building up countermeasures in his mind.

However, the power of the oldest star mage easily surpassed his assumptions.

A roar.

The earth split open.

And shooting out of the ground, a lion made of enough earth to form a hill appeared.

“A golem, even a star spirit of earth!?”

“Unfortunately I don't have the time to keep a puppet company.”

Kneeling to the ground, Alice touched the broken earth with her finger.

“Fly!”

Without waiting for a reply, Alice muttered a single phrase.

—The Grand Calamity of Ice.

It was the star spell that she used to freeze the Nelka forest. Like a ripple of water flowing across a quiet lake's surface, cold air came from the star mage feared as the Ice Witch of Calamity, and froze the burning wasteland blue. The ground was frozen in ice as far as the eye could see.

“As expected.”

Landing on a slope of ice, the lion golem let out a roar as its figure became a frozen part of the scenery.

“Alice, what is with that Founder's star spirit?” “...Even I want to ask that.”

Even after overwhelming the golem, the Ice Witch of Calamity's voice was hoarse as she gazed at the Great Witch who was looking down over them calmly.

“Even my mother the Queen did not know the true identity of the Founder's star spirit. I thought I would figure it out upon seeing it myself, but...”

Nebulis' princess was unable to come to a conclusion just like Iska. This was different from any star mage he had fought before. The star spells one could use was supposed to be limited to the phenomenon related to the star spirit dwelling in them.

“What's the possibility she is carrying multiple star spirits?”

“It's just about unthinkable.”

So Alice declared.

“A birthmark appears on humans who have conceived a star spirit, you know this right?”

“The star crest right?”

It was one of the reasons star mages were persecuted. Depending on the star spirit in their body, the birthmark's shape would differ, and the stronger the star spirit, the larger the birthmark. It was like one was possessed by evil — the first ones to see those star crests feared them and confined the star mages.

“When she appeared in the sky, I saw her back. Her wings pierced through and broke her clothes, and I saw a large black star crest there. That is the star spirit within her

body. However..."

Squinting her eyes, the Ice Witch of Calamity glared at the Founder.

"When I saw her in the royal palace, she didn't have those wings. If they manifest when the star spirit of space and time activates its automated defences, then those aren't real wings, but may in fact be the star spirit itself."

"As long as we know that much, it's more than enough."

If those jet black wings were the Great Witch Nebulis' embodiment of power, then if he severed those wings, it was possible that he could temporarily separate the star spirit from Nebulis.

"If we sever those—"

"————— Do ————— Do you ————— Do you think... You —————"

"Eh?"

"————— Do you think you can do it?"

The Great Witch laughed. It was far too sudden. The dark skinned girl's eyelids slowly opened.

"...I remember... This place. The Vuishada wastelands is it?"

"Nebulis!?"

"It couldn't be, star mage, did you wake me for the sake of a mere Imperial soldier? Even if it is such an incomplete awakening, I do not think there was a reason to hasten it."

Her gaze was filled with the light of her ego, and her eyes appeared to carry a strong colour giving sight to her rousing consciousness.

"...However, I see. You have quite the nostalgic swords in your hands there."

The Founder looked down at the star swords in Iska's hands.

“Do you know about these swords?”

“—”

Silence. It wasn't that she was intentionally keeping information to herself, the Great Witch Nebulis had simply forgotten her words as she silently observed the star swords and Iska.

“Well fine. I do not know how you ended up obtaining the star swords, but there is no way any man other than Crosswell could handle them.”

“Crosswell!?”

“What about him?”

“...The name you spoke just now, is my master's name.”

The strongest swordsman of all time in the Empire. He was Iska's master, and the former owner of the star swords.

...But why?

...Why does the Great Witch from a hundred years ago know about Master?

“A bastard like you, is that man's?”

With a puzzled look, the Great Witch opened only one of her eyes widely. However immediately following that, her small mouth formed an ominous smile.

“Haa. I suffer to understand that guy. To have entrusted the star swords to some unknown small fry.”

“You won't know such a thing without fighting me.”

“It is obvious. There is no future in which you defeat me.”

Breaking through the ground Alice had frozen, a boiling crimson splash sprayed upwards. Lava. It was one of the most powerful energies on this planet. Formed in the core of the planet, it was a super heated 'melted rock.' Its temperature surpassed a thousand degrees. Be it city walls or houses, all would melt and burn.

“Can you cross over a blazing sea?”

“I wonder.”

As if looming over him, a spray of lava assaulted Iska. Though the intense heat and steam was approaching, Iska threw himself towards the incandescent spray of rocks with no hesitation. Fixing his gaze on the falling mass of lava, he anticipated its trajectory.

He didn't step back, but forwards. Taking a step, he stooped his body low, and like a spinning top, he rotated and evaded the incessant rain of rocks by a hair's width. Furthermore, the rocks that he could not avoid were all cut down using only his sword.

“Despite such heat you show no fear and face it do you?”

The dark skinned girl exhaled with a quiet 'Hooo.'

“However, that choice was a mistake.”

The lava in the air constricted itself, and transformed into a snake entirely made of lava. The flame golem that was large enough to have to look up at began wriggling in a strange way. Iska's left and right flanks were sealed by walls of lava, and dead ahead of him the fire snake stood in his way. Furthermore, a mass of lava fell down behind him. And he was now fully encircled by lava on all four sides.

“You've been caught, Imperial soldier.”

“Is it not about time that you stop ignoring me?”

The boiling lava froze over.

“No matter how powerful a flame you manipulate, it is nothing but a weakness of yours to me.”

The young woman with blonde hair and a blue chill surrounding her.

—Iska opened the path, and Alice pierced through.

They had never spoken of this to each other. They just naturally moved to enact that.

“...A refined chill. You carry a good star spirit, and control it well.”

“I am honoured by your praise.”

The frozen earth surged forth, and went on to encase the entire golem made of flames and lava. Seeing that scene below her, the Great Witch clicked her tongue upon realizing Alice's skill.

“Child. Your turn has already been decided to come after this Imperial soldier.”

“Oh my? Are you being kind to a fellow star mage?”

“The opposite.”

The Founder looked down at her comrade. Her gaze contained an indescribable cruelty within it.

“Star mage who consorts with the Empire... Know that such an offence, will not be forgiven even if you cry and scream.”

“Just how I'd have it. I also cannot forgive you!”

Nebulis' princess returned the Founder's gaze.

“Despite being a star mage, you calmly harm one of your comrades. Even Rin agrees. You are no longer, a hero or anything else to the Imperial Household Agency!”

“A hero? Such a pretty word cannot save this world.”

The dark skinned girl shoulders began shaking. And she made a smile filled with pity, as if telling them she found it far too humorous.

“I've known for a hundred years. There are no heroes or saviours in this world full of pain. That's why I became a witch and annihilated the Empire. That's all there is to it.”

A hollow sneer.

Bottomless despair.

A confession of undeniable grief.

“I am a witch, and you are my enemies.”

A gust of wind.

A whirlwind formed between Iska and Alice with enough force to send a human flying. Furthermore, even the frozen earth at their feet began to peel as the gale reached its maximum strength.

“My star spirit, is the oldest one born at the centre of this star. It remembers all the phenomena of the star, and calls it forth from beyond the horizon of space and time. — You're both eyesores, vanish into the end of time.”

“Ah...”

“Alice!”

With the violent gale striking at her side, Alice let out a small scream.

A storm that could treat a human like a scrap of paper.

As her body was on the verge of being carried away by the raging winds, Iska grabbed her hand. And with his left hand, he thrust his sword into the ground as an anchor. Digging deep into the earth to hold his ground, he pulled in Alice's body while exposed to the storm

—A bright red spray.

Tearing into Iska's right arm that was holding on to Alice's hand, fresh blood sprayed out at that moment.

“Ow!?”

“Iska!”

“...Even using wind blades however she likes huh.”

The phenomenon known as a wind blade. It's true form, was that of small pebbles accelerated by the terrifying gale to the point where it could harm the human body, a supernatural phenomenon.

“Let go of my hand!”

While pushed by the wind, the Ice Witch of Calamity screamed. Iska's arm had been lacerated by the wind blades, and the wound grew larger as it extended up to his shoulder.

“What are you doing? Let go of my hand now, your arm will be torn off!”

The star mage tried to free her hand from his grip. However, the young man would not allow that.

“...I can't hear.”

“What!?”

“Because of all this wind, I'm saying I can't hear what Alice is saying! I can't hear anything about letting go!”

“Uu.”

The young woman's face twisted.

“...Why?”

Like jewels, her eyes glistened as she covered them.

“...I'm a witch. I'm not someone you should hold out your hand to like that to the point where you get injured.”

While biting her lips, Alice spoke self-deprecating words. Even if she called herself a 'star mage,' she was called a witch by people that she did not know, she was feared, and shunned... It couldn't be helped that it was painful. Those were the true feelings of Alice, the one called the Ice Witch of Calamity. And gazing into her eyes...

“Alice.”

The young Imperial swordsman spoke in an easygoing manner.

“Don't you think we get along?”

“...Eh?”

“Getting furious at that guy. Rin was injured for Alice. And even I, seeing the tyranny of such a star mage, can't even think of peace talks.”

“So what about it?”

“Where we are now is neither the Empire nor the Imperial Household Agency. It's the Neutral City. Our goals are the same, that's all the matters.”

And that was the trigger that started it all. Seeing the opera in the Neutral City Ayin. Ordering the same meal at the same restaurant. Getting excited over talking about their hobbies at an artist's exhibition—

“I'm the same. I don't want to lose against her. That's why, I won't let go of this hand.”

“...”

Alice opened her mouth as if to say something. But changing her mind, she averted her gaze... At a loss, she bit down on her lips many times over.

“...Can I believe you? You from the Empire?”

The Ice Witch of Calamity spoke in an anxious voice as her eyes swayed. In the middle of the surging gale, something was building up in Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX's hand.

“Ice Calamity, the infinite icy lights”

Crystal ice began to shine. A light spread out at Alice's feet, and the entire wasteland turned into a scene of snow and ice. Truly infinite — in other words, 'an uncountable and impossible to understand number' of ice crystals surrounded them by the power of the ice calamity star spirit.

“Star spirit of ice, shoot her down!”

A blue flash. The moment the crystals of ice rose from the ground, they sparkled in the air and left behind an afterimage as they shot up like lights into the sky. The freezing meteors of ice drew an arc in the air, and broke through the gale towards Nebulis.

“Icy lights? To think it broke through this gale... Child, is this your damned secret art?”

The Founder's voice became excited. As she thrust out her arms, the atmosphere in the air condensed and became a shield. The barrier which prided itself on matchless strength exceeding that of a steel wall while also being pliable, and met the flashes of light rising to the sky—

“Uu!”

She retreated. The small girl feared as the Great Witch discarded her defence and took evasive action. One hundred years ago, it was a scene that Imperial soldiers had never seen even once.

“Of all things...”

A red droplet went along her dark cheek. The meteors of ice which broke through Nebulis' shield of air, though just barely, grazed her cheek.

“To think it even broke through the bulwark of air.”

“Not yet. Because these icy lights, will keep going until all the crystallized ice in the air has vanished!”

“—”

The dark skinned girl rotated in the air. Just as she appeared to be flying higher, she rotated on the spot. After another rotation, she descended towards the earth, and came to a sudden stop. Using a complicated course of flight, she evaded Alice's icy lights.

However, that was only a few hundred at most. Cornered by the barrage which approached an infinite number of projectiles, Nebulis once more stopped her movements in midair. And as if responding to that, the gale that had been assaulting Iska and Alice subsided as it were all a lie.

“I've cornered you, Founder.”

She won. Alice was confident of this.

“Fall to—”

“*So aves cal pile.*” (Come, celestial staff)

'Interfere with the nucleus of the star.'

'Connect with mine self. Call it forth from beyond space and time.'

The Great Witch looked into the skies. And overhead, it became dark as if the sky was cloudy. An ominous black whirlpool blocked out the sunlight.

“...My star spell!?”

The black whirlpool moved and manifested as a shield before Nebulis. Alice's icy lights rushed in at it — but, the ice that managed to pierce the bulwark of air, upon touching the black whirlpool, was sent flying away leaving behind only a blue sparkle.

“What? What is that? What is that black whirlpool!?”

Alice yelled herself hoarse as she looked into the sky. The black whirlpool coiled up and formed a long pole in the oldest star mage's hand which matched her height in length.

“It took some time to form huh. Both myself and my star spirit have yet to awaken fully I see...”

A winding black staff.

The Great Witch — she held it up exactly as a witch would wield a magic staff.

“Come to know of death.”

She threw her staff from far overhead. And witnessing that, Iska was suddenly assaulted by intense dizziness.

...Space is twisting!?

...What... What is that creepy staff!?

Celestial staff.

As it approached the earth, Iska could feel with his skin that it was something tremendously dangerous.

“Ku... Oh star, shoot down that staff!”

A single staff falling from the sky.

From the ground, infinite ice from the icy star spirit. And the two collided head on in the skies. And before Iska could perceive it, the tip of the celestial staff fired down by Nebulis flickered.

—Destruction of Space.

The atmosphere screamed. And with a roar, the earth split, and the icy lights which could be said to be infinite vanished into the horizon of nothingness without leaving a single one behind.

By the time he realized what was going on — Iska was blown high into the sky by an invisible shockwave.

“...Uu... kaa, ha...?”

The frozen earth collapsed, and he tumbled down a hill.

He could sense the stench of blood in his mouth. He likely cut the interior of his mouth when he hit the ground, but he couldn't tell exactly when that was. He couldn't even perceive when the shockwave had hit him.

“...Al... ice...!?”

“—”

No response came.

Lying face down, Nebulis' princess didn't even raise her head. He could tell that she was still breathing from the slight movement of her back, but on top of being hit by the shockwave, her entire body should have been struck by the frozen earth. Even if she was conscious, she was likely not in a state where she could move.

“Even the Celestial Staff only has this much destructive force is it? As I thought, my power still has not come back.”

The black staff remained in midair. All the icy lights Alice had fired were annihilated,

and even with enough energy to smash the earth to pieces, the Great Witch scoffed with a dissatisfied expression.

“...What do you mean, only his much, destructive force...?”

“That is the difference between you lot and I. Can you not even tell the difference between heaven and earth?”

It was natural that she overwhelmed them.

From the very beginning, they were not a threat to her at all, that's what her gaze told him. But in reality, the only wound they were able to give her was the single scratch on her cheek from Alice's attack. Other than that, not even a speck of dust had stuck to her.

This was the Founder. The way she brought about a cataclysm by wielding her black staff could be said to be the perfect image of the power of the one feared as the Great Witch.

However...

“—”

“What's, with that look of yours?”

Leaning against his star sword, Iska stood up. Looking down on him from above, the young Founder raised her voice in discontent.

“Neither running away, nor begging for your life, nor shaking in fear... I do not like it. That impudent manner of scowling at me. Did you mean to strike back at me with that?”

“No.”

Iska used the star sword in his left hand to support his body like a cane. And the tip of the star sword in his right hand was thrust towards the Great Witch.

“I'll be striking back, from here on.”

“Are you sane?”

Nebulis let out a sigh as if she was saying she could not understand at all.

“The reason you could withstand the Celestial Staff, is because of that child's star spirit. However, take a look. Fallen to the ground, she cannot even stand. You no longer have a means of withstanding this staff of mine.”

“That's right!”

Letting out a breath mixed with blood, Iska kicked the frozen earth.

“Precisely because Alice could only hold it back once, I won't let it go to waste here.”

Iska tasted the power of the Celestial Staff with his own body. However, even so, his body could move. As if tracing the enormous scar in the earth, Iska raced forth. Onward to the Founder with the sun to her back.

“A mongrel who knows nothing but how to run forward.”

The dark skinned girl drew the staff to her hand.

“Crawl on the ground like a worm.”

She swung the Celestial Staff. Space roared as if it was choking on tears, the atmosphere twisted, and a strong blade of space and time took form. An invisible blade sharper than steel. And then—

Iska swung his star sword downwards, and cut apart the incoming blade of space and time.

“What?”

“Even if it's invisible, I can sense that it's there.”

He could sense the twisting wave in space with his skin, and hear the invisible blade cutting through the air. Even if it was the first time he saw that attack, as long as it was a star spell, the black star sword could isolate it.

...And that training was drilled into me...

...No matter what star mage I stood before, I trained never to waver.

“What sort of joke is this?”

“A joke? I'm always serious!”

Blades of compressed space came in from every direction.

And in response, Iska chose neither to retreat nor to stand still, he simply sped forward even more. Facing the screaming tears in the atmosphere with his star sword, he warded off the shockwaves from the invisible blades.

Dodging the blades closing in from behind, slipping through the blades closing in from the sides, even as the friction in the air brushed against his cheeks, receiving lacerations on his shoulders — Iska didn't stop. And then...

“...Keep... Running like that!”

Nebulis' princess once more got up as she was trembling on her knees.

“Rise up.”

The frozen earth jut out into the air. A mass of ice came out like a rising wall, changed shape, and with splendid craftsmanship, it was shaved away, polished, and transformed into an icy staircase before Iska.

It led to the heavens—

Towards the Founder Nebulis, a final glimmering passage of ice.

“Here I come.”

“I'm telling you you're being impudent!”

The Great Witch gripped her staff underhanded.

“You who do not know of the long lasting karma between me and the Empire—”

“Have you still not noticed?”

Iska ran up the icy staircase.

“Because you are so caught up in that antagonism, this worthless fighting won't end!”

“—Silence!”

The Celestial Staff shot out.

“Even if you hold the star sword, you cannot withstand this strike!”

The intense distortion of the atmosphere and the roar of the wind that accompanied the destruction of space and time, could not even be repelled using the star sword which could sever any and all star spells.

The moment the tip of his sword touched the tip of the staff, the destruction of space and time began right at that point. Even if he managed to isolate and sever the Celestial Staff, he would surely be caught in the destruction itself.

“I know. I saw it when it struck Alice's icy lights.”

Letting out a perfectly clear ring, the black star sword fell to the ground. It was something that Iska himself, released from his hand.

“You bastard, what are you!?”

“I know this is the world's strongest shield.”

Iska stuck out his right hand. And within his palm, he gripped the 'Seed of Ice.'

'It's an invincible shield. It can even suppress the large scaled Imperial weapons of destruction.'

She had said it was invincible. In that case, he would believe in it. That the shield entrusted to him, could withstand the Celestial Staff.

“Alice!”

Hearing the young man's call, the Ice Witch of Calamity complied with a single word. Though she lay on the ground, she had absolute confidence.

“...Bloom!”

Fragments of ice burst open. A perfectly clear sound rang out in the air. The 'Seed of Ice' that Iska gripped in his hand sprout, and what took shape there, was an extremely beautiful mirror shield.

—Ice Flower.

Withstanding the black star sword which could sever any star spell, it was the only exception in the world. Aliceliese Lou Nebulis IX's star spirit, the 'Star Spirit of the Icy Flower' manifested its true nature as a star spell in the form of an extremely beautiful flower of ice.

'...Can I believe you? You from the Empire?'

In that deadly gale, Iska did not let go of her hand. And as that hand grasped hers, Alice herself entrusted him with the seed for her ultimate secret skill, the 'Flower of Ice.'

—The great flower shield.

Serving as Iska's shield, the world's most beautiful flower of ice, took on the Celestial Staff.

"Ridiculous!?"

Both the Celestial Staff and the Flower of Ice, shattered into pieces with a perfectly clear ringing in the air.

The dark skinned girl who was now defenceless did not move. Even if her power had just awakened, she was shaken that her absolute attack was completely repelled.



With a dumbfounded expression unable to accept the reality before her...

“...Why...?”

“Can you not tell?”

Iska raised the white star sword overhead.

“A hundred years ago, even if there were swordsmen who stood before you, there was never 'a swordsman and a star mage.'”

Nebulis was the hope of all star mages. If she continued to be the hope for all star mages, the outcome would have likely been different, and Alice would not have entrusted Iska with the Flower of Ice.

—The star spirits decided.

The star mage that would bear the burden of the new age, was not the Great Witch.

“Sleep once more, Nebulis.”

Iska swung his sword down, aimed towards where those jet black wing peaking out of the girl's mantle.

“When you next open your eyes, surely, the world will be somewhat better than it was.”

A small scream.

Have the source of her power, the star spirit, severed from her body, the dark skinned girl lost consciousness.

As the Great Witch closed her eyes, she collapsed as if asleep once more, and then, she vanished as she was sucked in by a fissure in space.

Intermission

Within this Dark Nightfall

The Imperial capital Yunmerungen.

During sunset.

While the city was dyed by a strong red light, the sound of multiple people clapping reverberated within the assembly hall that existed five thousand metres underground.

“Magnificent.”

“The fact that the signal of the Great Witch Nebulis' star spirit has vanished, means that she was suppressed does it not?”

“It is unfortunate that we do not have any combat footage. The Great Witch Nebulis' star spirit, is the star spirit that was born in the furthest depths of this planet. If we were able to obtain footage, our research regarding star spirits would have likely accelerated rapidly...”

“No. The significance of stopping the Great Witch's awakening is grand.”

“As one would expect of the successor of that man. Dear me, it is just the achievement we had hoped for.”

A room without a single light fixture.

Within the eight monitors that formed a circle facing each other, were the silhouettes of eight men and women. Their figures were always indistinct, and it was the utmost limit to just distinguish their rough physical forms. The highest decision making body in the Empire, the 'Eight Grand Apostles.'

“The Great Witch has once more been silenced. At present, the Ice Witch of Calamity is a slight worry, however...”

“It is the duty of the Successor of Black Steel to bring down the witches. It's nothing, if

it's him, he will likely get it done. Whether or not he himself desires it.”

“Indeed.”

“The fifth seat of the Holy Apostles — Lisha Ein Empire's 'experiment' is progressing smoothly. Now that the Great Witch is asleep, the Nebulis Imperial Household Agency will fall.”

“That man, the Man of Black Steel Crosswell continues to hide the secret of the stars even from us. It was somewhat of a miss that his successor had not been told anything about it, but whatever. The prophecy of the citizens of the stars is approaching... It won't be long.”

A smile could be sensed from the voice of a beguiling woman. It was a voice which was bewitching, intellectual, and coldhearted to the point that it would strike fear in the hearts of any who heard it.

“The Successor of Black Steel Iska. Your desire will be granted.”

“Yes. We will grant everything to you. If you desire peace, then in the near future, we promise you that we will definitely bring about perpetual peace to the world.”

“—By the means of the extermination of all witches and warlocks.”

“Because this star so desires it.”

And with that, all the monitors turned off at once. As the curtain of silence fell over the Imperial diet, only the faint echo of clapping hands could still be heard.

Epilogue

Underneath this Beautiful Starry Sky

The wasteland as dust danced in the air.

After the ice which overruled the sandy soil melted away, the earth gouged open by the Celestial Staff remained in its pitiful state. And within that pitch black fissure—

Little by little, the wind carried sand over. And really only by a small amount, the spectacle of the earth being carried into the cavity in the ground could be witnessed. It was as if the earth was intent on filling in the scar with sand. As if the planet itself had a will.

“...”

Setting that scenery aside, Iska slowly ascended up the elevated dune.

“...It's already this late huh.”

With the night wind mixed in with sand brushing against the back of his neck, Iska shivered slightly. He had arrived at the Neutral City Ayin right around noon, but when he realized it, the sun had already completely sunken under the horizon.

He walked across the wasteland.

Walked, and walked, and walked.

Without even holding a light, he kept walking across the uninhabited wasteland.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Atop the dune he had been climbing, a beautiful young woman with blond hair was sitting down while holding her knees. Having finished recuperating a step ahead of him, all on her own, she was waiting atop that dune.

“I think that you know this already, but Rin's burns will be fine. For now, the burns will

remain for a while, but given time it seems they will naturally heal.”

“I see.”

“Captain Mismis said that Jhin and Nene have been waiting, so she quickly left for the Imperial capital on the evening bus. It's fine for her to talk about the Founder right?”

“I don't mind. Because of that Great Witch, we've even caused problems for the Neutral City, so it isn't something for us to hide. It is the Imperial Household Agency's responsibility after all.”

Nebulis' princess nodded while still holding her knees.

“I have one more thing to say from my side. I've thought of it somewhat, and in the end, I think the Great Witch has returned to the underground sanctuary.”

“In the Imperial Household Agency?”

“Yes. As you would expect, I can't really explain it to you in detail. But I will take the sanctuary as my responsibility and put it under my supervision. I'll have mother hand over the key to the entrance... So that she never awakens on her own again.”

While sweeping off the sand on her clothes, Alice stood up. Even though her entire body was thrashed in the fight against the Founder, her standing figure was still noble, and beautiful. Just like the time in the Nelka forest, when he first met her.

“With that, there is nothing else for us to report to each other right?”

“Yeah.”

“...I see. Then let's start. The final battle between just you and I.”

A place and time that nobody would interfere with.

All the conditions were in place.

The Successor of Black Steel Iska, and the Ice Witch of Calamity Alice — it was the time that the heroes born to the Empire and the Imperial Household Agency met, and the time that they had to bring an end to everything.

“Don't hold back you hear?”

“Yeah.”

A single step, Alice advanced forward. And as if matching her, Iska also stepped forward.

“...”

“...”

They each silently looked at their opponent, and drew closer one step after the other.

The five metres between them became three.

Three metres became one.

And by the time they realized, Iska and Alice were close enough to touch each other.

“I have something to say.”

“What a coincidence.”

Hearing that request from the Imperial swordsman, the girl from the Imperial Household Agency consented. And then...

“...A truce. Today... I'm far too tired...”

“...No objections.”

With a thud, Iska and Alice, collapsed onto the wasteland at the same time.

“...It's just for today you know?”

“I know.”

“We, from tomorrow on, we will once more be enemies you hear?”

“You're right.”

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

Face up on the ground, the two of them gazed at the starry sky.

“What a beautiful sky.”

“Un.”

The boy and girl were lined up on the ground without moving a muscle. If they were seen from the night sky by a bird, the two of them may have appeared as intimate lovers, or perhaps close siblings.

“The 'cradle's seat' is pretty today isn't it? It can only be seen at this time, so this may already be the last look at it we can get.”

“Which one?”

“That one. Can't you tell at a single glance?”

As the boy pointed up to look for it, the girl pointed out to the starry sky with her finger as well.

“The city lights are bright in the Imperial capital even at night, so it's rare to see this kind of starry sky. Is that blue star sparkling straight above the one?”

“Not that one, the one next to it... This time you went too far.”

“...This is hard.”

“Geez, you dummy.”

Even though they were enemies.

Even though they would have to once more fight each other the following day.

—Just for now.

With laughter in the air, the Successor of Black Steel Iska and the Ice Witch of Calamity

Alice, continued to look up at the same starry sky. This was—

The story of the battle, between you and I.

Will the next time we meet be our final battlefield? Or will it be the beginning of the world's Holy War?

That story, begins here.



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